

AMAZING DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

ATLAS

JUSTICE

JULY

35c

**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

WRITES OF MENACE,
GREED AND LOVE

IN A
SMALL MOTEL

**LIE
DOWN,
KILLER**

A COMPLETE
SUSPENSE
NOVEL

IN THIS ISSUE

By **RICHARD
S. PRATHER**



JUSTICE

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A young widow listened while
her two gallant suitors discussed how she would die . . .

IN A SMALL MOTEL



Feature Novelette

by JOHN D. MACDONALD

THE couple from Ohio wanted
two rollaway beds for their two
tired, whining kids, and so Ginny
Mallory had hurried to her store-

room and wheeled one down the
walk to the end unit of Belle View
Courts. The man made no move
to help her wrestle the bed over
the low sill of the door. He stood,

a dead cigar clamped in his teeth, watching her struggle with it.

Ginny hurried back to the store-room and got the other one and just as she came to the door of the end unit, another car pulled up by the office and began honking. The tourist woman was fussing with one of the children.

The rollaway wedged itself stubbornly in the door. As she pried at it, the man said, "Set the other one up over there, girl."

For a moment she thought she would howl like a kicked dog. She stood quite still for a moment, then pulled again. The bed came free and she shoved it into the room.

"I'd appreciate it if you and your wife would unfold this one and put it where you want it. I've got another customer out there."

She turned quickly and as she went down the walk toward the office she heard him holler something about ice. Let him holler. Thick October heat lay heavily over south Georgia. Though she walked briskly, she felt as if all the heat of the long summer just past had turned the marrow of her bones to soft stubborn lead. She managed a smile as she went out to the big car with Massachusetts plates. A tall, white-faced

man stood by the door of the car. He was alone.

"Do you have a single?" he asked, his voice flat and toneless.

"Yes, sir. Do you want to look at it?"

"No thanks. I'll take it. Which one is it?"

"Number three. Down there. The third from the end."

"Can I put my car in back?"

"It will be perfectly safe right in front of your door, sir."

"Can I put it in back?" he snapped.

"Yes, I suppose so. But it—"

"Where do I register?"

"Right in the office." She went in and went behind the counter. He followed her in. She laid the card in front of him. He signed J. L. Brown, gave his residence as Boston, wrote in his license number and the make of the big car, gave her the money and she gave him the key. As he went out the door she asked him if he would want ice. He ignored her. She wished they would all be as little trouble. And she wished more would come so that she could cut the lights on the big red-and-blue neon sign, leaving only the sign that said: *No vacancy*.

She stood behind the counter for a moment, resting a lot of her

slim weight on her elbows, the heels of her hands cupped over her eyes. She had finished cleaning the rooms and making all the beds at noon. She had showered, changed to a crisp blue denim sun suit, and had a quick light lunch. Now, at six, the sun suit was sadly wilted. Her long blonde hair, piled high on her head, was damp with perspiration. She smoothed the corners of her eyes with her fingertips. She knew the lines of strain that the long summer had put there. Her eyes felt as if they had sunk back into her head, and they burned like coals.

Out on the highway directly in front of the Belle View Courts the big diesel rigs thundered by. The sun was far enough down to give the world an orange look. There was a hint in the shadows of the blue dusk that would bring the mosquitoes out of the lowlands. And this, she thought, is the slack season. And I can barely keep up with it. And barely keep ahead of the mortgage. *You were so damn proud of this hideous white elephant, Scott. And it was so much easier when you were around.* I don't know why. It just was.

She took her hands from her eyes as the screen door slapped.

The man from Ohio said, "How about that ice, girl? We going to get it?"

"Right away. If you wait a minute, I can give it to you."

But he went back out the door, saying, "Bring it over to the room."

She went back into the small room where she slept and ate. She opened the refrigerator and dumped ice cubes into a glass pitcher. She hurried to the end room with it, knocked, walked briskly in and set the pitcher on the tray on the bureau. As she turned toward the door the man said, "Here, girl." He pushed a dime and a nickel into her hand.

Ginny looked quite fixedly at his chin, at the dark stubble, and said, "Thank you, sir."

When she got back to the office she put the fifteen cents in the pottery pig on her window sill. Next came a honeymoon couple, too intrigued with each other to need much service. She settled them in eighteen, and there were only three units left to rent. She wondered if she would try to eat now, or wait in the hope that the three empties would fill up quickly.

She looked with practised eye at the highway traffic. Most of

the business was beginning to come from Florida-bound cars. It would continue that way until Christmas, and then the north-bound ones would start to build up, and by April the court would be full of the ones headed home, bright with new tans.

She went outside and leaned against the front of the office, her hands shoved deep into the wide front pockets of the sun suit. She felt sticky and weary. The sun was entirely gone and the world was blue. Peepers were beginning to chant over in the patch of swamp beyond the gas station. Cars had turned on their lights. The big rigs were aglow like Christmas trees.

Across the way, the flood lights made the gas station a white glare. She saw Manuel pumping gas into a battered station wagon. Johnny Benton came out and stood in the glare of lights, looking across the highway. When she waved, he saw her and came strolling across. His weight crunched the gravel of her parking area, and her neon made a red highlight on his shoulder and on the side of his tanned face.

He came up to her, offered a cigarette. She took it and he lit both cigarettes with a kitchen match he popped with his thumb-

nail. "How's it going, Ginny?"

"Three empties left."

"Not bad for this time of day. Things are picking up a little. We had a good day too."

For a time there was no traffic and the night was still. The station wagon had gone. Manuel was back inside the station. Ginny could hear the Cuban station on the small radio across the way, bongo drums and dry rustle of gourds.

"You beat, kid?" Johnny asked, his voice deep and slow.

"I'll live, I guess."

"You start filling up every night, you get some help, you hear?"

"Sure, Johnny. I'll have to."

"You can get a part-time girl for maybe twenty a week. No need making yourself sick, you know. How much weight you lost this summer?"

"Not much."

Johnny flipped his cigarette away, slapped at a mosquito on his big bare brown arm. He leaned against the wall beside her. "Funny thing," he said.

"What's funny, Johnny?"

"When Scotty brought you up here from Jax and built this layout, we all sort of figured you for something different."

"How, Johnny?"

"Well, you just didn't look like the kind of woman to take to this kind of work, that's all. We figured on you giving Scotty a bad time soon as the novelty sort of wore off. I guess we figured wrong."

"Maybe you didn't."

He laughed again, softly in the night. "You're too bull-headed stubborn to quit now. I don't know as old Scotty would have made this place pay out, but I got a hunch you're going to."

"Scott would have made out," said Ginny.

Johnny was frowning. Ginny could tell by his expression that he was thinking of the senseless traffic accident that had taken Scott's life seven months ago.

Johnny wrapped his knuckles on the bar. "You use a cold beer? We got some over there."

"Later on, maybe. When are you closing, Johnny?"

"Around eleven, I guess. Manuel's taking off about eight to go see that gal of his. Look, Ginny. Manuel and I were talking it over the other day. We made the deal with Scotty on that room of yours we share. Scotty set it too low. It isn't right we pay you so little. Manuel and I, we figure the fair thing to do is bump it about fifteen a month."

"I don't want any charity, Johnny."

"Charity, hell! I'm talking about fair."

"Let me think about it, Johnny."

"No need thinking. You're on summer rates now. When the season is on you get twelve a night for that room. Know what that is? Three hundred and sixty bucks a month."

"And look how you've helped. All the little jobs I can't do, Johnny. And think of what it would have cost me to have men come out from town. Last week you fixed the electric pump. And Manuel painting all those ceilings for nothing. Let's not talk about it, Johnny. Please."

"Okay, okay," he said softly. He looked through the office window. "More business, Ginny." She saw his shoulders stiffen. "It's that guy from Jax. Ferris." He moved toward the door. "Whistle when you can use that beer."

She stood in the doorway, heard Johnny Benton and Don Ferris say 'Hi' to each other with exaggerated casualness. Don came to the doorway, held her arms tightly, kissed her on the cheek. "Hello, darling," he said.

"Hello, Don. Surprise visit?"

DON made a wry face. He was a brisk, thin-faced man with dark hair, quick, shrewd, humorous eyes. "I should have phoned for a reservation, dear. Can I stay over?"

"Of course."

"I really have something important to talk about."

"Don't you always?"

"Now be good." He turned and looked quickly across the street toward the gas station. "Does he pester you?"

"Johnny is a good friend, Don."

"He was a good friend of Scotty's. I suppose he has some primitive idea of protecting you. Actually, I suppose I feel better having him close by. I'd refuse to permit you to stay out here alone."

"Permit, Don?"

He looked at her quickly, grinned. "A manner of speaking. You have to forgive any—proprietary manner. Remember, I did propose three times before you married Scotty Mallory."

"Excuse me, Don. Customers."

They came in two cars, two elderly couples traveling together. They took sixteen and seventeen and seemed pleased with the accommodations. That left fifteen

the only one empty, and Don wanted that. With a tired sense of freedom she came back from getting them settled and worked the switch that turned off the big lights and left the 'no vacancy' sign gleaming. She looked across the way and smiled to herself as she saw Johnny hold up his arm and make a circle of thumb and first finger. She got the key to fifteen and handed it to Don.

"Would you like ice, sir?" she asked him.

"Enough to make a pair of drinks for us, Ginny."

"I want to clean up, Don. And I haven't eaten yet."

"Let me take you into town. Benton will watch the place."

"He does enough. I don't like to ask him to do that. I've got enough here for both of us."

"No. I'll go into town and bring something back. Please let me."

She thought for a moment. "All right, Don. And thanks."

Ginny went in and closed the door to her room. She took a quick shower, changed to a yellow cotton dress with a wide belt. It was a dress that Scott had liked. So proud of me, she thought. So pathetically delighted with me. She brushed her hair and let it hang long to her shoulders the

way Scott had liked it. She made up her lips carefully in the small mirror.

Just as she finished she heard somebody rapping on the counter. She went out and saw that it was the man from Ohio again. He gave her a slightly startled look. "Uh—you got any aspirin. My wife's got a headache."



"Just a moment, please."

She went and got a tin of aspirin. "Two is plenty," he said. "They work good on her. Do—do you manage this place?"

"I own it."

She saw the faint dull flush and knew that he was remembering the fifteen cents he had given her.

He coughed. "It's a—nice layout. We'll stop again sometime."

"Please do," she said, and smiled mechanically.

She saw Don swing his convertible in and park in front of fif-

teen. He got out with a big paper bag in his arms. He came into the office, gave her a quick bright look of approval.

"Take it right in, Don. On the table."

"Some very special steak sandwiches, darling. Salad. French fries. Let's put the hot stuff in the oven and have a drink first."

She set the small table. He made drinks. He was quick in all his movements, sometimes almost catlike. She liked the crisp whiteness of his sports shirt, the good fabric of his slacks. Once upon a time she had very nearly said yes to him. But Scott had come along. She knew that Don sensed how tired she was. He made a special effort, she knew, to be amusing while they ate. The stiff drink had relaxed her. All the customers seemed bedded down for the night. The peepers were in full chorus. She heard the clattering roar as Manuel drove off to visit his girl.

After they had cleaned up, Don said, "Would we get eaten alive if we sit outside?"

"It might not be too bad."

They went out and sat in the metal chairs on the grass near the florid beach umbrella. Their cigarettes glowed red in the dark. High speed traffic made ripping

sounds in the night, stirring warmth against their faces.

"I want you to think over what I'm going to say, Ginny. I want you to consider it very seriously."

"What is it, Don?"

"I know the amount of your mortgage. You can't keep secrets from a lawyer, you know. And I talked to Ed Redling about this place. He's one of the shrewdest real estate people I know. He thinks he can unload it for you, and get you out from under with about fifteen thousand free and clear."

After a time she said tonelessly, "I had six thousand saved and Scott had twenty-one thousand from his uncle. So we put twenty-seven thousand in it, plus a fantastic amount of work, Don."

"Then admit that it was a poor gamble. Take your loss and get out."

"Scott believed in it."

"And because he believed in it—because he was wrong, a girl like you has to do coolie labor, wear herself out, get old before her time, to make something work that was a bad gamble from the beginning. Isn't that being a little sentimental? Scotty had to buy the best in all departments. It gave you too big an investment."

"I can make it pay off."

"All right. You can make it pay off. What is going to happen? Just when your mortgage payments start to shrink to the point where you can make more than a bare living for yourself, somebody will come in and put a fancier outfit within a quarter mile of you. And then you won't even get the fifteen thousand out of it. Ginny, you've got to trust me. I'm thinking only of your good. I guess it's no secret that I want you to marry me. I want you to get off this highway and come back to Jax where you belong. This isn't the sort of thing you should be doing."

She laughed flatly. "Johnny says I'm bull-headed stubborn."

"Let me tell Ed to go ahead with it, dear."

She sat in the metal chair. The night air was getting cooler. For the first time in many days she was completely relaxed, comfortable. It was a strong temptation to let Don go ahead with it. And so much easier to be Don's wife than—Scott's widow. Don would get them a nice little beach house. Long lazy days in the sun. Just a few rooms to take care of. And sleep, sleep, sleep. Thousands of hours of it. It would be so blessedly simple. And he was nice. Quick and funny and nice. It

would be cheating him, in a way.

"Suppose I don't love you, Don. Suppose I don't feel that way toward you. More like a friend, I guess. A good friend."

"I'll take my chances. All that will come later. Believe me."

"Do you think so?" she asked in a half whisper.

He leaned forward, took her hand harshly, his fingers pressing deep. "No one can say you haven't done wonderfully here, Ginny. You've done more than anyone had any right to expect."

"Perhaps."

He released her hand, settled back. "I want to be one hundred percent honest with you, my darling. Right at this point I'm onto something big. I've put everything into it. I'm in it with Redling. If we can hang on for another three or four months, we won't even have to think about money for the rest of our lives. And to be brutal about it, that dowry of fifteen thousand will help a hell of a lot. We could borrow, but that would mean letting a third party in on it. And that would cut the profit."

"So you want me for my money, eh?" she said.

In the darkness she saw him twirl an imaginary mustache. "Exactly, my fair young maiden.

At heart I'm a confidence man."

"Fool!"

"Seriously, darling, don't be annoyed with me, but I can't help feeling there's something a bit morbid about—working yourself to death to run this thing as a sort of monument to Scott Malory. And I'm sure he'd be one of the first to tell you that."

"He had such a big dream, Don. This was going to be the first of a whole chain. And then we were going to get into the restaurant business too. And you don't know how hard he worked before—before the accident."

"Really, Ginny! You believed that big fat dream?"

"Don't sneer, please, Don. Everybody needs some kind of a dream, I guess."

"I'm sorry. I came out here to—make sure that next time I come, I can take you back with me."

She brushed at the thin high whine near her ear. "I can't decide—boom, all of a sudden."

"Think about it. But don't think too long."

An airliner went over, running lights green and red against the dark sky. She could see into the gas station, through the wide sheet of glass that turned it into a bright white box. Johnny was

racking cans on one of his display shelves. He completed the pyramid and backed up to see how it looked. She watched him turn and walk outside, hook up the hose and begin to wash down the concrete apron in front of the station. A mosquito pierced her ankle with its thin sting. She heard footsteps on the gravel and turned to see Mr. Brown from Boston standing there, tall and angular against the light from the office.

"Yes?" she said.

He loomed over her. "What are you telling this man about me?" he asked, quite coldly.

3

FOR a moment the question dazed her, it was so meaningless. "I don't know what you mean."

"I had my lights out and I've been watching you out here, talking and talking." He moved his head a little and the flood lights of the gas station across the way caught the lenses of his glasses. The man sounded righteously indignant.

Ginny stood up, a small shivery feeling at the nape of her neck.

Mr. Brown said, "I suppose you told him I put my car in back."

Don had stood up. "Relax, my

friend. Neither of us has the slightest interest in you."

"That's so easy to say," Mr. Brown said. "I heard the plane, too. And the cars slow down when they go by. You must all think I'm a fool, or blind. Why are you all waiting?"

Ginny held her hands clasped tightly. Across the way the small radio was tuned to brassy jazz. A distant truck moved toward them, the sound beginning to smother the music.

Don said, "I don't think you're well. Why don't you go back in your room and let Mrs. Mallory phone a doctor for you?"

Brown took a slow backward step. "Would it be—a doctor?" he asked softly. He turned his head toward Ginny and once again his glasses caught the light. "I suggest you do not use the phone, Mrs. Mallory." The truck roared by, the motor sound changing to a minor key as it rushed south down the dark road. Mr. Brown turned and walked away, his stride long and slow. They watched him go into his darkened room, and they could not hear the door close.

Ginny giggled, and it was a strained thin sound. Don said, "A crazy, darling. Pure and simple. Persecution complex. I don't

know what else. A paranoiac, maybe."

"He seemed all right when he registered. He just wanted to put his car in back instead of in front. I didn't think anything about that."

"I don't like this. He might be dangerous."

"What can we do?"

"I can phone to town, to the police."

"Maybe he'll go to sleep now. And leave in the morning."

"And hurt somebody on the highway, further down the road? We have some responsibility, I think."

"He said not to phone."

"How would he know. Come on." He walked beside her. "Don't walk so fast, darling. He's probably watching out the window."

"It's—creepy."

"He just needs help."

They walked slowly to the office, and Ginny went in first. Don followed her and she heard the click of the lock after he shut the door. He went briskly behind the counter, took the phone from under it, listened for a moment, hung up. "Somebody's using it," he said.

She stood, waiting, and she felt that it was grotesquely melodramatic. The man was just a bit

odd. She heard a small clicking against the glass panel of the locked door. She turned and saw Mr. Brown standing outside the office door. He held his elbow a bit away from his side. He tapped again on the glass, metal clicking against glass. A small round metal eye against the glass. He motioned to her with his free hand. For a moment she did not comprehend.

Don said, and his voice trembled a bit, "I think you better let him in." She turned and stared at Don and he was looking beyond her, at the door, and he ran his tongue quickly along his underlip. She moved to the door and she had the odd feeling that she was floating, her feet not touching the tiles. The world looked bright and faraway, as though she were looking at it through a long tube. She unlocked the door and the round metal eye looked up a little; looked, it seemed, at her throat. She put her hand there instinctively. The screen door was slanted against his shoulder. Across the way Johnny was hosing down the concrete near the pumps.

"I want you and your friend to come and help me, Mrs. Mal-lory," Brown said.

"We'll be glad to help you," Don said quickly.

Brown moved back a little. "What is your name?" he asked Don.

"Ferris."

"Mr. Ferris, please walk beside Mrs. Mallory. Walk down to my room and go in and turn on the light as you go in. Don't walk fast."

The concrete walk that led down the length of the court was roofed. Metal chairs were aligned against the wall on the right. They walked side by side. Don whispered, so that she could barely hear it, "Do exactly what he says."

She turned on the lights and they stood inside the room, their backs to the screen door.

"Mrs. Mallory, please stand right there. Mr. Ferris, please close the blinds on the windows."

As Don worked the cords on the blinds, Ginny heard Brown come in and close the door. She knew that he stood close behind her. She thought she could feel his breath stir her hair. The sudden blow against the back of her head shocked her. It drove her head forward, hurting her neck. She stumbled a few steps and her knee struck the edge of the bed and she fell awkwardly, catching

her weight on her hands. She realized that he had hit the back of her head with the heel of his hand. She turned quickly. Brown looked at her calmly. She had not looked at him closely when he had registered, receiving only the impression of paleness and height and dark clothes.

He had a thin face, receding dark hair, prominent frontal bones in his forehead. His glasses had thin gold rims, and his face and eyes had an oddly colorless look—the face of a severe, dedicated and trustworthy clerk. His dark suit was poorly cut, and he wore a gold wedding band.

"Mr. Ferris, please place the large black suitcase on the bed and open it. It is not locked."

Ginny saw the metal eye follow Don as he moved. It was a thick-looking revolver with a very short barrel. It had a sullen, dangerous look. Mr. Brown's fingers, wrapped around it, looked long and white and frail.

Don put the suitcase on the bed and opened it. Ginny glanced into it. Apparently the money had been packed with great care, but in moving it about the top layers of wrapped bills had slipped from their orderly stacks. It all had the cold impartial look of money stacked in a teller's cage.

"Sit beside Mrs. Mallory, please," Brown said.

Don sat so close beside her that their thighs touched. Ginny felt a small tremor of his body. "It isn't Brown, of course," Don said. "I saw the pictures."

"Very old pictures." Brown leaned his back against the frame of the closed door and closed his eyes for a second or two, then opened them very wide. "I am sorry to ask you to do this." His smile was quick, thin, almost shy. "All my life I have handled money. Now, for some reason, I find it impossible to count this. I begin, and each time I seem to become confused."

"How did you manage it?" Don asked, and Ginny sensed his attempt to be casual. Her head had begun to ache as a result of the unexpected blow.

"It was not difficult, Mr. Ferris. A matter, actually, of merely walking out with it at precisely the right time. Mrs. Mallory, I suggest you get that paper and pencil from the desk. Call the totals off to her, Mr. Ferris. The numbers on the wrappings are correct."

Ginny wrote down the neat numbers as Don called them out in a flat precise voice. It took a long time. She had to make two long columns. At Brown's request

she added them, announced the meaningless total. Three hundred and seventy-two thousand, five hundred. Brown had Ferris recheck her addition.

"There was more at first," Brown said. "One bundle I checked and I cannot seem to remember where."

"What will you do now?" Don asked.

Brown looked at him, expressionlessly. "I should like to sleep, of course. I rather imagine I am expected to make some sort of attempt at escape. But they've watched me for years. They've forgotten that I know precisely what it feels like to be watched. I haven't slept in a long time."

"You're sick," Ginny said.

He looked at her and he seemed to be puzzled. "Perhaps."

"Where were you planning to go?" Don asked.

"I had never completely decided that."

"They'll catch you," Don said.

"An error of fact. They already have. They caught me—a long time ago. Now they're letting me travel, trying to make me think I'm still—free. I suppose it is a form of torture. I've seen *them* in the restaurants and on the highway. When I turned in here I knew this was where they had

planned I would stop. But I was too tired to leave. I can tell by your eyes that you know all about it. Both of you."

There was silence in the room. Ginny saw Brown's arm tremble. He steadied the gun hand by holding his wrist with the other hand.

4

FOR a few moments Ginny was able to look at the world through the eyes of the sick Mr. Brown. Everyone knew. Everyone watched him. Everyone watched him with cold amusement, superior scorn.

"But it isn't the way you think it is—" she started.

"It's no use, Ginny," Don said. His voice was odd. She turned and looked at him in surprise. There was an odd look on his face. He said, "You're right, Mr. Brown. We all know about it. We were ready for you when you got here."

"Of course," Brown said quietly.

Don leaned forward. "But we could—change sides."

Ginny saw Brown become rigid. He seemed to cease to breathe for a time. "Why?" he demanded.

Don reached over and placed his hand flat atop the stacked money. "Answer enough?"

"How do I know it isn't a trick?" Brown asked. "You could pretend to help me get away without their knowing. Maybe you would be merely—continuing the sport."

Don said scornfully, "Don't you know us better than that? It's against the rules for us to take any of the money. Once we take the money it means we've turned against them."

Brown frowned at him. "Is that one of the rules?"

"Didn't you know that?"

"How much would you have to take?" Brown asked.

Ginny watched Don take a bundle of the currency out of the suitcase. His hand was very steady. She noticed that he picked stacks of the older bills. Stacks of twenties and fifties and hundreds. He took out ten stacks and set them aside.

"This much," he said.

"It's a lot," Brown said.

"But think of the risk we're taking."

Brown thought a moment, nodded. "That's true. What is your plan?"

"Do you know how we've followed you?"

"That has bothered me. I've changed routes dozens of times when there was no car in sight.

But you people have always known."

"A device was installed on your car. It gives off an electrical impulse. And we've followed the car by radar."

Ginny watched Brown, saw him puzzle it out, accept it. "That explains a great deal," he said, nodding.

"I'll disconnect the device,"



Don said, "and install it on my car. Mrs. Mallory and I will drive north in my car and they will think you have doubled back on your tracks. You head south. If you're clever, they'll never find you again."

"And how will you avoid punishment?" Brown demanded warily.

"While we're traveling north, I'll disconnect it and throw it out at the side of the road. I'll report that we were following you and lost you. They'll think you dis-

covered the device and threw it out yourself on your way north."

Brown shifted uneasily. He looked at Ginny and then at Don Ferris. "We'll go to my car and you will show me the device."

Don shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

"Another rule?" Brown asked dubiously.

"Of course," Don said. "I'll have to do that alone."

The gun hand sagged slowly. Brown pulled it back up with a visible effort. "I'll let you out," he said. "I'll stay here with Mrs. Mallory. Go change it from my car to yours and come back when you've done it." He reached behind him and unlocked the door. He glanced out, pushed the screen open to back out. Don stood up and took a step toward the door.

Ginny heard a thud, a grunt of effort, a scrape of shoe leather on concrete. The screen slammed. Don stood poised for a moment. Johnny Benton pulled the door open awkwardly and came in, walking Brown ahead of him. Brown's arm was twisted up into the small of his back, and his lips were flattened back against his teeth with pain. Johnny looked very big, very brown, very welcome. Brown's glasses hung from one ear. As Johnny shoved him

roughly forward the glasses fell to the floor and Brown's foot came down on them, crunching the lenses. Holding the man with almost contemptuous ease, Johnny examined the revolver in his other hand. He slid it into his hip pocket.

"What goes with this character?" Johnny demanded. "I never heard crazier talk in my life."

"It's been in the papers and on the radio for four days," Don said. He stepped beyond Johnny and pulled the door shut. Johnny had seen the money on the bed. He stared at it and licked his lips and stared some more.

"Heavenly hosts," he said softly.

"Let go of my arm," Brown said.

"Sure. You go sit right there and be good," Johnny said. "Are you okay, Ginny?"

"I'm all right." She felt better. Johnny was like a breath of fresh air in the room.

Don stood with his hands in his pockets. He was frowning at the money.

Brown sat on a straight chair by the windows. Without the glasses his eyes looked mild and dazed. He said, "You'll be interested to know that Mr. Ferris and this woman have accepted money. They were going to help me get

away. I understand that is against the rules."

"Shut up," Don Ferris said thinly. He walked over to the bed, picked up some of the stacks of money, dropped them back into the suitcase. He took out his cigarettes. Ginny accepted one. He didn't offer one to Johnny. Johnny pulled a single cigarette out of his pants' pocket.

"Is he nuts?" Johnny asked.

"Completely," Don said. "It was one of those crazy things. So damn casual about taking it, he walked right out past the guards. He'd worked there thirty years."

"Twenty-eight," Brown said.

Don ignored him. "He's got delusions. He thinks he's being watched all the time. He thinks we're part of the big gang watching him. According to the radio, they think he holed up somewhere. They don't know he got this far. He was lucky. What luck! A crazy man's luck." He turned and looked sharply at Johnny. "Three hundred and seventy-two thousand, five hundred dollars."

Ginny felt an odd prickling on the backs of her hands. She rubbed them together. Don and Johnny were staring at each other. She could read nothing in Johnny's face.

"Tax free," Johnny said softly.

The two men looked at each other for a long time. Then, as though on some signal they both turned and looked at Ginny. She looked into Don's eyes, and then Johnny's, and she had the feeling she had never met either of them before. It seemed quiet in the room. With the blinds closed the smoke from the cigarettes hung in the air.

"Why are you acting so funny?" Ginny demanded, and her own voice sounded strange to her.

Neither of the men answered her. Johnny stepped over to the bed. Don was watching him carefully. Johnny took the paper with Ginny's total on it, glanced at it casually, took it over to where the glasses had been smashed against the asphalt tile floor, near the edge of the throw rug. He picked up the gold frames and shook them lightly. Some more fragments of the glass dropped out. He sat on his heels, the pants tight on his blocky thighs. He kept his head tilted to the side to keep the cigarette smoke out of his eyes as he cautiously brushed the fragments of glass onto the paper. When the floor was clean he put the paper down with the frames on top of it and carefully folded it into a small bundle. He squatted there, staring up at Don.

After a long silence Johnny said, "A good eye doctor can take a little bitty hunk of lense and figure out the exact prescription. I read that once in a story."

Don moved back and sat suddenly on the bed, on the far side of the suitcase from Ginny. He sat down as though his legs had gone weak. Ginny looked at him. He avoided looking at her. He put the separate stack of money back in the suitcase. Ginny looked at Brown. His pointed chin was against his chest. His white hands rested on his knees, fingers slightly curled. He looked as though he might be asleep.

"What are you thinking about?" Ginny asked, her voice a bit too loud. They did not answer her, and she knew she did not need an answer.

Don sat on the edge of the bed and counted on his fingers. "His name on the register. The car. Possible serial numbers of the new stuff." He looked at Johnny, who had stood up and who was carefully placing the bundle of broken glass in his pants' pocket.

Johnny turned as though looking out the door. But the blinds on the door were closed, inches from his eyes. Ginny could see the serrated metal grip of the revolver, see the shape of it

through the stretched cloth of his hip pocket.

Johnny said softly, "Sure. One at a time. The register is on cards. They aren't numbered in any serial sequence. No trick there." He half turned and gave Don an odd smile and pantomimed tearing up a piece of paper.

"You can't tear up a car," Don said softly.

"A truck went through that abutment on the bridge near Grover three months ago. It's still wide open. Deep there, and a pretty good current, and you don't have to go through any kind of town to get there. I got work gloves in the station, just in case."

Ginny put her fist so tightly against her mouth that her lips hurt. "No," she said. "No. I won't let that happen."

Don reached suddenly across the closed suitcase and took her wrist in his hand, holding it tightly. His fingers were icy. "Use your head," he said softly. "Insurance covers their loss. And that man is no loss. They get like that, and you can't cure them. Just the three of us. And nobody ever says a word. Ever. One hundred and twenty-five thousand apiece, roughly."

"Not apiece," Johnny said, tucking his thumbs in his belt,

planting himself flatfootedly. "Not if I do the dirty work for you, Ferris. I'll take one eighty-five. That's nearly half. How you handle the rest of it with her is your business."

"A third apiece, Benton."

"And for that, what do you do?"

Ginny felt as though her throat had closed completely. Don dropped his cigarette on the floor, stepped on it, turning his shoe. He sat with his elbows on his knees, hands hanging limp from the wrists, head lowered. He looked slowly at Brown. Ginny saw the muscles of Don's jaw bulge, saw an ovoid pulsation at his temple.

Don said in a half whisper, "You take care of the car. I'll—do that." And he made a partial gesture of his head toward Brown.

"Without marks," Johnny said, just as softly.

"I'll go with you," Don said. "I'll stun him and let the water do it."

Ginny saw Johnny nod in agreement. Johnny went over to the bed, standing half between them. He rapped lightly on the edge of the black suitcase with his brown knuckles. "A cruiser," he said softly. "And some of those little lovelies who carry hatboxes. And

a sports car. All wrapped up in there."

"Not all at once," Don said sharply.

Johnny turned his head slowly and looked at him. "I'm not that stupid, Ferris."

Ginny suddenly saw what she had to do. She jumped up as fast as she could and ran for the door, remembering that it was unlocked. Johnny's hard arm locked around her middle after she had gone three steps. Her feet slipped on the tiles. He pulled her around roughly, clamped a heavy hand over her mouth. She could smell gasoline on his hand. It nauseated her. She wondered if she would faint. Johnny's voice came from far away. "This is your problem, isn't it?" he asked Don.

Don came over to them. He took Ginny's wrists. He looked pleadingly into her eyes. "Please, darling. There's no risk at all. There'll never be another chance like this one. If we don't do it, local cops will take him. And how much money do you think will be left by the time they turn it over? Say you'll go along with us. You don't have to do a thing, and you get a full third. Will you do it?"

She shook her head from side to side. Beyond him she could see Brown in that same position. His

head had tilted a bit to one side. She knew he slept.

"It's no good without her," Johnny said. "It stinks."

Don knuckled his chin. He shrugged. "Hold her, then. Let me think."

"Put her in the same car?" Johnny asked quietly.

5

SHE SAW Don look over her shoulders into Johnny's eyes. He bit his lip and she realized, with complete terror, that he was actually able to consider it as a possible course of action, even as Johnny had been able to suggest it. Terror was like a veil in front of her eyes, distorting Don's face, filming it. It was misty and only the shrewd eyes were clear. At last Don shook his head. "Too risky, Benton. Too many questions. We've got to make her partly responsible, so she can't talk about it."

"Suggestions?"

"Let me think. Damn it, let me think!"

"It's so perfect, Ferris," Johnny said regretfully. "Perfect, all except for Ginny and her big mouth. Stash all that money and use it a little at a time. I know where it would be safe to get rid of the new stuff."

"Can't you shut up!" Don yelled.

"Keep yelling and you blow the whole thing."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm getting an idea. We got to move fast. Knock him out while I'm thinking, Ferris."

Don looked at Johnny sharply. "What's the idea?"

"Do like I tell you. Then we'll bring the car around."

"Walk him out. That's safer."

"Do like I tell you, Ferris. This will work out all right."

She saw Don turn and look at the sleeping man. She saw Don go into the small bathroom and come out at once, wrapping a hand towel around his fist. He licked his lips uneasily as he went up to the sleeping man. He hesitated.

"Go ahead," Johnny ordered.

Don had his back to them. Ginny felt Johnny brush aside her hair with his chin and kiss the side of her neck. Both his hands were busy holding her. The callousness of it made her shudder. She tried to bite the palm of his hand but her teeth could get no purchase on the calloused skin. She saw Don step forward and grasp the hair of the sleeping man, tilt the head back sharply and strike at the jaw with his padded fist. It was a vicious blow

and she knew that the scene was implanted so deeply in her mind that she would never forget it.

Brown did not fall. He looked shocked and dazed. He raised his hands slowly. Don Ferris drew the padded fist back again.

Johnny spun her away from him and said in a conversational voice that sounded loud in the room. "Okay, Mr. Ferris."

Don turned slowly, releasing Brown's thin dark hair. He took a step toward Johnny. Ginny, sidling toward the door, saw Johnny pull the stubby revolver out of his pocket, saw Don stop suddenly, midway in his second step.

She saw Don's eyes turn toward her. His voice was thin. "Ginny! He's decided to take all of it! Ginny!"

Johnny backed quickly so he could watch both Don and Ginny. He gave her a slow grin and he kept the revolver pointed at Don. "Kid, go phone the police in town. Talk to Tom Heron if you can."

The towel dropped from Don's fist to the floor. He straightened up. "Wait a second, Ginny. Okay, Johnny. I see your point. It would have been too risky. Look. He's too far gone to even remember what the total was. So let's do this. Grab a few bundles. Not too

much. Twenty, thirty thousand. Nobody will possibly know the difference. He's too crazy to make sense. Use your head, Johnny. And what harm would that do, Ginny? What harm? Come on!"

He reached his hands out, palms upward, half pleading.

"Come back as soon as you phone, Ginny," Johnny said softly.

She left. She half ran down the concrete to the office. The line wasn't in use. Tom Heron was at the station. "This is Mrs. Scott Mallory at Belle View Courts on Seventeen. Johnny Benton is holding a man here for you. He's the one who—took all that money in Boston."

She heard a distant startled, metallic gasp, heard Heron say, "Right out. Ten minutes." Fifteen miles, she thought, and maybe they would make it in ten minutes.

She walked reluctantly back to the room. Events, moving so quickly, seemed to have taken her beyond the ability for logical thought. The door to the room was still open. She looked through the screen. The suitcase was on the floor now. Mr. Brown lay on the bed. He was holding a wet towel against his jaw, and his open eyes stared mildly up at the ceiling. Don stood on one foot,

the other foot on the chair where Brown had sat. Johnny was lighting a cigarette. The gun was not in sight. As she went in he held the match flame and gave her a cigarette. She leaned close to take the light, looking at the flame, then glancing up at his eyes.

Don looked at her as she turned away from Johnny. Don looked familiar again, his eyes quick and humorous. "Well, it was a thought," he said.

Ginny could not look into his eyes. She turned her back to both of them.

"What's the matter, darling?" Don asked. His voice was easy.

She hunched her shoulders as though she were very cold. She could not answer him. The long slow minutes went by. Cars came from the south at high speed, slowed and turned in, slewing on the gravel. She was glad there were no sirens.

Don said quickly to Johnny, "Don't think you've got anything, Benton. Anything you can use."

"I don't," Johnny said in his deep voice. "Hell, you're a lawyer, aren't you?"

They had gone. The sedans and the money and Mr. Brown. And Don Ferris had gone, leaving

number fifteen empty again.

She stood in the night, arms folded tightly, and she saw the floodlights of the gas station wink out. The night was much darker than before. By the time her eyes had adjusted, Johnny was coming slowly across the highway. He came up to her, tall and slow. He stood by her.

"It wasn't a good thing to do, Ginny," he said slowly. "I guess you know why."

"I guess I do."

"Ginny, once when I was a little kid and I was sick, the thermometer got dropped and it busted, and they put the mercury in a little dish. Damnedest stuff. Hold it in your hand and give it half a chance and it would run right out between your fingers. Pretty stuff, but tricky."

"Johnny, I don't want to—"

"You've got to listen to it. He's like that. Coming up here all the time. Nothing you can really put your finger on. Then I see him looking at all that money. Looking at it in a special way. I could tell the way he was thinking. So I had to give him a little chance. Like tilting the dish and watching that mercury run. You see, I was afraid he was going to take you away from here. I wanted to give you a real good look at what I

figured Ferris was, all along."

"I—can't ever forget the way he—"

"I know. Funny thing. I found out I'm no saint either."

"How do you mean that?"

"For just a minute there. I don't know. Gun in my hand and all that dough. Just had a sudden crazy feeling about grabbing it and running."

"You wouldn't have," she said firmly.

"Glad you think so, kid." His voice sounded amused.

She turned toward him.

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"You didn't want him to take me away from here."

She sensed the way he suddenly became awkward with shyness. "Yes, but I can't say anything yet. Not so soon. It isn't right to speak up so soon. Scotty and I, we—well, you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, Johnny."

She went into the office for a moment and turned on the big sign: *Belle View Courts. Vacancy.* She went back out and stood beside him in the soft Georgia night, and they waited together for a night traveler, for tired headlights coming down the long straight road.

Detective Downey found a way to cheat skid row—forever.

THE BLUE NOTE



by DOROTHY DUNN

I'D NEVER been in that bar before, although there aren't many that I've missed.

I guess it was the name that got me. I was driving out Delmar,

hoping I wouldn't run a light so a cop would get close and smell my breath, when I saw the sign: *The Blue Note*. Just the way I was feeling.

That's for me, I thought. That's better than the empty apartment, with Peg gone, bag and baggage.

Why go home? It wasn't home anymore. It was a hollow mockery, a place of tears, kisses, final anger, and last harsh words.

Peg had left two weeks ago for her sister's. She'd walked out, leaving me too sodden to follow her, too angry to want to at the moment.

Then morning had come and she wasn't there with her warm lips and her snuggling ways. And night had come and found me empty inside, hating the world, hating the liquor in the kitchen cabinet, and wanting nothing except my wife who was very deeply the only true love I'd ever known.

I spent the first week drinking and remembering all the warmth she'd given me. She'd never done anything to hurt our marriage, and I had. I'd let liquor get a good hold on me, which must have made her feel that she wasn't enough.

But when the second week started and she didn't come home, I changed.

Okay. So she means it this time. So she's convinced I'm a hopeless lush and she doesn't want any more of me. She's through. She must have meant the scathing things she said more than the sweet things she used to whisper when she was in my arms.

She used to talk to me about my defense mechanisms. Maybe she was right. It didn't matter. Toward the last of the second week I was flying high.

So she was through! Fair enough. I was through, too. No more checking in on time. No more caring whether I took a drink or whether I didn't. No more fighting the craving. There wasn't anything left to fight for.

My detective agency was already colder than Billy-be-damned. I was existing on divorces, skip traces, and the proceeds of a couple of past big ones that had fallen in my lap a year ago.

I'd been hanging one on with my legman, Joe Franks, in a downtown bar. When I left, I thought I had it hung.

Then I saw the sign. *The Blue Note*. Not too many blocks from my own place. Good name, I thought, for the way I'm feeling. Better than going home to an empty apartment, where I can see Peg curled up in every chair,

where I can still smell her perfume in the bedroom, where I can hear her voice asking me please to stop drinking and come to bed.

I parked the car a half a block up and walked back to the tavern.
The Blue Note.

Paul Downey, that's me. Great guy. Broad shoulders; nice, kind face; good clothes; licensed private detective. A natural for romance. But I'd just lost the only romance that could ever mean anything to me. I'd had Peg almost a year and it's funny what living with a person does to you. Losing that person is like losing an arm.

I got sore at myself for feeling the way I felt.

I walked into *The Blue Note* determined to get Peg out of my system if it was the last thing I ever did. Liquor wouldn't do it. Maybe there was another way.

The blonde sitting at the bar was show-girl type. But beautiful. Really beautiful. I ordered a scotch.

She was alone, and she seemed jittery.

The Detective Paul Downey in me warned: *Lay off. This blonde means trouble.*

But the weak Paul Downey, whom Peg had walked out on,

coaxed: *Your wife left you. Pick up this dame. Why not?*

I balanced a half dollar on my thumb, flipped it. The coin came down into my palm—tails.

GRETA was her name. She lived in a new building, just a few blocks from *The Blue Note*. Modernistic. The rental probably ran close to three hundred.

The liquor was buzzing in me now, making me analytical and talkative.

"Some set-up, Baby. Mind telling me what you do to rate all this?"

She came over and put her arms around me. Her lips were hot and a little too wet.

"Let's just think about us, Paul. We were going to have fun. Remember? You fix a drink and sit down right over there. I'll be with you in a jiffy."

I fixed the drink and I sat down on a tufted sofa that must have cost six hundred, and there was a white loop-pile carpet, and black teakwood tables, and tall beautiful lamps. Whatever she did—she did good.

I couldn't figure her for a career girl. She wasn't that bright. She'd either divorced some walrus for a

nice chunk, or had a really loaded boy friend.

She came back, walking toward me slowly so I'd get the whole effect. And she stopped at a point where the light did the most good to the filmy thing she had on.

I put my drink down and went to her. She seemed ready to boil over. After a minute or two, I led her over to the couch and leaned over her.

She caught my hands and held them tightly. "Paul, you'll stay here, won't you? You won't leave me alone?" Her eyes held real fright, and I realized she was actually pleading. Not for anything I had to give. Just my presence. Maybe my muscle. All excitement drained out of me.

"What are you scared of, Baby?"

"Don't ask questions. Just kiss me and stay here."

I leaned over and got my drink and took a long swallow. This was no good. This was how little boys got into real trouble.

She sat up and put her arms around me and went to work on my ear, whispering and playing with her hot breath.

"Paul, please. I like you, really. And it may mean my life! I'll give it to you straight. Did you ever hear of Jackie Steele?"

"Who hasn't? Mr. Boss Man for the Saint Louis end of the Chicago syndicate. You tied up with that hood?"

"Not because I want to be. I had a good booking at the Chez Paris and he went for me. He worked me into a frame so I'd have to tie up with him."

"I know how Jackie Steele works. In fact, I tied up with him myself once."

That had been a dilly. One of my good cases—when I'd been a bright boy. Before I'd fallen into the soup habit. But the cops wouldn't follow through. Jackie Steele was pretty well covered by people he'd bought. And the smug little character had hauled me in and laughed at my efforts to buck a system. Nothing I could do. That must have been the start of the futility I'd been drowning ever since.

Greta was clutching at me now, desperate. I knew it wasn't an act.

"He means to kill me, Paul! Tonight. But he won't use a gun—on me. He'll do it with his hands and stretch it out so he can enjoy it. He's not very big. You could handle him, Paul. You know you could."

I got up and re-built my drink and made one for her.

"What did you do to him, Baby? Cheat a little?"

"Just once. I had to. Jackie is brutal. I had to get away from him. Now—he knows about it."

"Why don't you get out, get away?"

Her smile was bitter. "I thought you said you knew about Jackie. There isn't a place in the world he couldn't find me with a hired gun. I'd rather try to escape the police!"

"Work on the drink. You need it."

I lit a cigarette and paced the white carpet and tried to figure an angle for the blonde. Instead, I found myself thinking of Peg.

The sick feeling came back. Sicker than ever. Peg wasn't stacked brazenly like this blonde, but when Peg had been in my arms the whole world faded away and left just the two of us floating in the perfect peace of being together. It couldn't ever be that way with anybody else. Not for either one of us. She loved me, I knew. It was the drinking she had walked out on. Not me.

All at once, I hated myself for being here, for letting a blonde tramp try to use me for a body-guard.

I didn't owe her a damn thing.

I put my empty glass down and crushed out the cigarette.

"Sorry, Baby. I don't want to be suckered into any part of this set-up. I haven't got much of a life left, but I'd like to hang onto it long enough to see if it's any fun living on skid row. Get on the phone and call yourself a cop!"

She threw herself on me at the door and I could hear her fingernails raking down my coat sleeve as I pulled away and shoved her aside.

"He'll kill me, Paul. Oh, my God!"

I slammed the door, surprised that she didn't follow me to the elevator.

The lobby was deserted. At two-thirty in the morning most people are in bed. Where they ought to be, according to Peg. Decent people, that is.

On the front steps of the building he brushed past me. Jackie Steele in a tux; small, dapper, and wiry. Nobody to fear unless you knew faces. His was thin, and there was no expression in his eyes. Just a hard, bright glitter.

He saw me. He took me in at a glance and I knew he recognized me, but he didn't even break his stride. I took three steps down, then turned facing the building. I knew I ought to go back, but I

was swaying a little on my feet.

Hell! Why be a Galahad for a blonde I didn't even want? Why give my life, worthless as Peg thought it was, for a simple brush with a dame in a bar? It wasn't my mess.

I could go back up there and break Jackie Steele up into little pieces. I could kill him with one healthy sock. But what good would that do? Nobody kills Jackie Steele and gets away with it. The syndicate would take over and have things running smoothly in several days. Then I'd be a dead duck.

I walked down for my car and started out Delmar toward home. *The Blue Note* was closed now and I needed a drink. There was still half a fifth in the kitchen cabinet and Peg wouldn't be there to coax me to lay off.

I killed the scotch and flopped on the bed, numb. It was the only way I could sleep in that bed without Peg. The only way I could stand being in that empty apartment. I almost wished I'd never wake up.

Three hours later, just at daylight, the pounding started on the door and I dragged myself off the bed, wishing whoever it was would go away. But they didn't. Insistent knocking. Urgent.

I crossed the living room, staggering a little. My mouth burned. My eyes were watering.

There were two of them. Well-dressed. Polite. And the under-arm guns didn't bulge too much out of the tailored suits.

"Paul Downey?"

"That's right."

"The boss would like to see you. We'll drive you over."

"Come inside a minute."

They came. They stood there in the living room that Peg had worked so hard on to make just right. They were casual, but alert.

I was still dressed, but I had to go back into the bedroom for my shoes. One of the hoods came with me.

"I feel like hell," I said.

"Hangover?"

"The blind staggers. You woke me up just after I passed out."

"This won't take long."

JACKIE STEELE runs a night club in East St. Louis that's a front for many activities. And there are a lot of people around who don't know what he is, how much weight he carries, and what power he has behind him.

He'd changed from the tux into a conservative gray business suit. He sat behind a massive executive

desk, the same one over which he'd laughed at me a year ago.

"We meet again, Downey."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. I've just got a little something to give you. We'll say that you hit the jackpot this time." He nodded toward an envelope on his desk.

The envelope was open. I picked it up. Five thousand dollars. My head was splitting.

"Strings?" I asked.

"No strings. You know that. A year ago you wouldn't talk business. But how have things been going since then?"

"I see what you mean."

And I did see. All at once. A private investigator can't work very efficiently without police backing. I'd been blaming my lack of efficiency on the soup I swilled, because Peg was always trying to convince me. But maybe it was something bigger than that; with drinks the result, not the cause. And bad as I wanted Peg, I hadn't been able to skip the drinks. Maybe I ought to try licking the thing at the source.

Change. She kept telling me that I needed to change.

Well, this would be the biggest change anybody ever made. I put the envelope in the breast pocket of my suit.

"Is that all, Steele?"

"That's all. There's nothing for you to do, except nothing. I'm sure you understand. And you look like a man who would rather do nothing than anything else. You look beat."

"Right," I said. "I've hit a plateau. I like it. May I go now?"

"Of course. Want one of my boys to drive you across the bridge?"

"No, thanks. I'll get a cab."

He shrugged, and I left.

Sleep was out of the question. I was at that burning in-between stage that's as close as you can get to hell on earth.

I stopped at Bush's Steak House and ordered a whiskey sour. It was nine in the morning. After the third one, I came half-alive and got another cab to my office on Olive Street. There was a razor there and a fresh shirt.

I cleaned up, then went over to the Jefferson. I had a real drink this time, then ordered some breakfast in the coffee shop.

The five thousand dollars was burning a hole through my chest. A big, hot hole that stabbed into my heart, killing the few good beats I had left in it.

How low can you get? How low down? Your wife walks out, and now you've lost the last shred of

your self-respect. All you had left was honesty. How can you pull out of this one? *Why try?*

I couldn't eat much of the breakfast.

At noon, I bought a paper and went back to the tap room for a scotch.

Front page. Right where I knew it would be.

Greta Hanson in a publicity pose, real glamor shot. Then a newspaper photo of the body, head and neck concealed.

Brutally slain, the article said. Beaten, then strangled. The police didn't know who had done it. The murder had been reported by Jack Steele, a friend, who became alarmed when she failed to keep a date with him.

The police didn't know! I laughed into my scotch, wondering if there was anything you couldn't buy if you had enough money. Maybe they couldn't prove it, but surely they knew!

I didn't feel sorry for Greta, exactly. The way she played, it was bound to happen one of these days.

I just felt angry. Not at Jackie Steele in particular, but at myself and the whole weak world.

I tossed the paper aside, disgusted.

I was halfway through another

drink when Joe Franks came in. My legman who would have to be looking for another job soon.

"Thought I might find you here, Paul." His face was all lit up with enthusiasm. "We just got ourselves a new client! An angel!"

"Have a drink and tell me about it."

He sat down.

"Well, I checked in the office about eleven, hoping I'd find a few bucks in the mail. And the call comes. Weekly retainer of a century, just for doing a little checking on people now and then."

"Interesting," I said flatly.

"Paul, what's the matter with you? Some crackpot business man wants to hire us to get background material on his prospects as they come along, and you sit with a long face. Won't take more than two days a week!"

Joe Franks is a good legman, but he's gullible, a little dumb.

"What's the name of our new client? Where do we send the reports?"

Joe's drink came and he took a quick swallow. Still excited.

"No name. Just a post office box. We'll get our instructions over the phone, mail the data, and every Saturday we get a C-note in the mail. This is very

private, private investigating, the man said."

"I'll bet. Did it ever occur to you to tell him to come out in the open, or go to hell?"

"Well, no, Paul. It seemed all set, the way he talked to me. I thought maybe he's contacted you first. He seemed so sure."

"Did he give you an assignment, Joe?"

"Yes, and a goofy one. Just an example of how soft the dough is going to be. He wants me to find out who owns *The Blue Note* bar and check the owner's financial status. And he wants a list of the employees. That's all. For a hundred smackers!"

I stared into my drink, seeing plenty in the amber liquid. Jackie Steele had bought me and this was his way of telling me how final the sale was.

He didn't want any information on *The Blue Note*. But Greta must have told him where she picked me up. He was telling me now that he could have the bartender identify me as the man who left with the blonde.

And he wouldn't be wasting his money. In time, he'd throw real jobs our way. And there we'd be in our high-button shoes, working for the syndicate.

I looked over at Joe's eager face.

"Lay off it, kid. For a few days, anyway."

"You know something about it, Paul? Such as who the angel is?"

"That's right. I'll let you know."

There's a certain stage in my drinking when my mind gets cold and clear. It doesn't last long, but I walked out of the Jefferson and into a cab. I stopped feeling sorry for myself long enough to know what I was going to do.

Go home. Get sober. Get my gun.

THE apartment wasn't very messy. I hadn't spent that much time in it. But the dust had gathered on the mahogany pieces that Peg kept so shiny. And the empty bottles in the kitchen waste basket were smelling. I took the trash out and emptied it. Bottles and old cigarette butts. I ran a rag over the table tops.

Then I put a pot of coffee on the stove to perk while I took a cold shower.

I was all dressed up in my tan gabardine and still drinking coffee when Peg came in.

She put her bag down inside the door and stood there, hesitant, looking at me. She was smil-

ing and crying at the same time.

We met in the middle of the room. She was in my arms now and there was a world again that had meaning to it.

We both said the same things, talking at once. The cry of our loneliness, our need for each other.

When that part was over she curled up beside me on the love seat, her head on my shoulder.

"I was wrong to leave, Paul. But I thought it might help you. I thought if you had to make a choice between the drinking and me. . . ."

She looked around, smiling a little. The coffee cup seemed to fascinate her.

I've never been anything except honest with Peg. She had just walked in at a lucky moment. Another thirty minutes and I'd have walked down to my car for the pint in the glove compartment.

"Don't get your hopes up, Sweet. I'm no different yet. It's worse without you. So much worse!"

She had her arms tight around me.

"I don't care, Paul. I'll do everything I can to help you. I know you want to lick it. I'll try to be more understanding, more intelligent about it."

"You've been wonderful, honey. Always wonderful. Just keep loving me. That's the only thing that matters. I don't deserve it, but. . . ."

She kissed the rest of the sentence back into my mouth.

For a couple of hours, I forgot all about the liquor in my car.

She was quiet and relaxed in my arms now. With my lips against her hair, I thought about what I had to do, and I was thankful for this moment. Proud, too. For the first time in a year, I felt a little strength, a little bit of self-respect seeping back into my scotch-laden blood. It was going to be all right. Everything was going to be all right.

I murmured: "Hungry, little one?"

She laid her cheek against mine.

"I haven't been hungry for two weeks!"

"There's still bacon and eggs in the box. And a few cans. I could fix you some goop."

"No, thanks. But how about yourself?"

"I have to go out for a little while."

She sat up, reaching for her robe. A little of the strain came back into her face, but she wasn't going to say anything. She'd probably read a book on alcoholism

and made a lot of new resolutions for herself.

I held her face cupped in my hands. "This isn't what you think. This is business, just a man I have to see. I know I've said that before, but this time it's true. Look at me, Peg. You know it's true, don't you?"

"Of course, Paul. Don't look so sober, darling!"

"Fine thing for you to say!"

A few tears now. "Don't joke about it. Paul, I love you so much!"

"I know, Peg. I know you do."

"Do you know what time you'll be back?"

"Not for sure. Be good, Baby."

I kissed her. "You get some rest."

"I will. Don't make it too long. And, Paul—"

"Yes?"

"I don't expect you to stop drinking, just like that. If there's none here, bring some home with you. Home is where. . . ."

"Thanks, Peg. I'll see you."

I put on my coat. The envelope in the breast pocket didn't burn into me now. It just felt stiff and strange, like my backbone.

I got my gun out of the desk drawer and went out the back way to my car. It was ten o'clock, and I felt good. I felt like a

strong, primitive man battling through a storm, holding his own against the elements.

I took one deep drag out of the pint bottle, then drove east to the bridge that crosses the river. . . .

The Club was always crowded. Jackie was smart enough to serve good food and book good floor shows. He wanted the legitimate trade. Some of the best people went to Jackie Steele's place. And the prices were right. I'm sure he took a loss on that end of it.

I sat at the horseshoe bar and had a scotch and water, staring at it, smelling it, and wondering why the cure was always such a tough thing.

I looked around. The hood that had picked me up that morning was tuxed up now, acting as *maitre de*. No wonder he had been polite.

I walked over to him and gave him a chummy smile. He'd been in the office when I accepted the envelope, so he smiled back. Brothers under the skin.

"Wonder if I could see Jackie. Something came up I think he ought to know about."

"Sure. You know the way, Downey. He's having his dinner in the office, but he'll see you."

I walked down a long carpeted

corridor and knocked. There was a crisp, "Come in."

The rackets are a lot smoother than they used to be. The syndicate is a business, efficiently operated. Jackie Steele is the head in this area. Branch manager, sort of. He's got his hired guns and his muscle morons, but they're just on call. They don't dog his steps and guard his doors. Jackie's in no personal danger, unless he knows about it ahead of time.

Nobody with any sense would touch Jackie Steele. One young cop had tried. Three days later, he'd been killed by a hit-and-run.

Jackie looked up, chewing on a piece of steak.

"Want to talk to you," I said.

He swallowed what was in his mouth and started cutting the next bite.

"I expected that. They usually make a try for more money once they accept the first grand or two. Isn't the extra century a week going to be enough?"

"Is that a dole, or would you be getting something for it?"

He put down the cutlery and leaned back. "You might be useful now and then, Downey. Getting quick information if I needed it. I never know what might come up."

So sure of himself! So sure that his system of buying people would always work.

"Anything else, Downey?"

"No. That's all."

I didn't preach to him, or tell him why, or try to make him squirm. I just pulled out the envelope and tossed it on his desk, then shot him between the eyes.

Then I walked back down the long carpeted corridor and nobody came running to investigate. Maybe his office was sound-proof, or maybe the din of the dance band had covered the shot. I wasn't worried about it.

At the bar I stopped and ordered a straight scotch, toasting myself in the mirror.

After that, I had another one to toast the young cop who had lost his life for trying.

On the way home, I stopped at a package store and bought a fresh fifth, just as Peg had suggested.

With luck, I ought to have a few days before the syndicate got into gear again. And they'd be good days.

The depression was gone now. The fear was gone.

I was sure that I wasn't going to lose my wife's love, and that I would never end up as a skid-row bum.



by CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

A HOT LICK FOR DOC

The wild, crazy music made Doc forget a murder.

THIS is a story about a certain street on Saturday night. Its moral is: "Never steal hotel towels if you want to get away with murder."

It is a tale about three lives that

came together for a few hours on a certain street on a certain Saturday night—and when the evening was over, three of them were dead. It was an unusually quiet Saturday night for this street.

The six people involved:

Jim "Doc" DeFord, a skid-row bum. There was some rumor along the street that he had once been a big-time musician, but you can't believe everything you hear.

Sally Garcia, a beautiful girl who was ready to sell anything for what she needed—anything.

Ramon, the wonderful kid, the genius in loud sports coats, the poet of the clarinet.

Freddie, the big ex-wrestler who owned the joint where Ramon blew his wild, crazy music.

Mama Lopez. She sold chili in the front of her shop and tea in the back—and not the kind of tea you sipped at five in the afternoon.

And the corpse. . . .

You could tell it was Saturday night by the sounds and smells that came up from the street. Loud jazz drifted out of beer joints and tangled with even louder mambos and sambas coming from the other side of the street. There was the corn-shuck smell of tamales, and the odor of cheap tequilla.

It came through the hotel window on a breeze that stirred a curtain faintly. The curtain brushed the nose of Doc Jim DeFord and woke him from a sodden, alcoholic sleep. He groaned and sat up, then grabbed at the

bed post as his head swam off his shoulders and floated across the room.

He closed his eyes and tried to think back. He could remember up to about four o'clock this morning. Then it all dissolved into a confusion of noise and thick, ropy layers of cigarette smoke and Ramon blowing some wild, crazy stuff on his clarinet and Sally Garcia laughing with her white, even teeth—and then nothing.

His head floated around for a while, then came back to rest painfully on his shoulders. He sat there a while and then got dressed which consisted of putting on his shoes since he'd slept in his shirt and trousers.

In the shirt pocket he discovered a limp sack of Bull Durham and rolled his first cigarette of the day. He inhaled deeply and gazed with bleary eyes through the window, down on Agnes Street which was one of the main streets of the Latin American quarter of Corpus Christi, Texas. This part of Corpus Christi looked very much like a Mexican border town.

But at night, like a blowsy old tramp who puts on her mascara and rhinestones, the street comes alive with neon. Then there are lights, music, and tequilla. Then

there is much laughter and women with soft, restless hips, and sometimes a knife sinking into a man's belly in a dark alley.

Doc sucked on the limp cigarette again and tried to keep his hands from shaking off his wrists.

Behind him, he heard a yawn. He turned and watched pretty Sally Garcia wake up languorously, like a sleepy kitten. She was a lovely girl, blessed with a flawless complexion and luminous dark eyes that many debutantes would have hocked papa's bankroll to possess.

She smiled sleepily, yawned, and dug her hand into her hair. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Got a cigarette, Doc?"

He held up the sack of makings.

She made a wry face. "Lord no. There are some ready-rolls in my purse on the bureau."

He got them for her. She wiped the back of her hand across her damp forehead. "Boy, it's hot tonight."

She was maybe twenty-five, maybe nineteen—it was hard to say about a girl like Sally. There was a story about her just as there was behind everyone on Agnes Street. She'd been down in the Latin American quarter for about three years now, working as wait-

ress, B-girl, and part-time V-girl. But you couldn't hold that against her too much. She'd had some rough breaks and she hit the weed heavily.

You couldn't buy that much gauge on a waitress's salary; besides lately she'd gone in for the bigger kicks and heroin cost more than marijuana. Sally was anglo but she'd married a Mexican musician named Garcia in Monterrey a few years back. After he and his rich family kicked her out, she'd never been worth much by social standards anymore. It seems there had been a baby boy, but the Mexican family was influential and Sally had no money or relatives. When they took the kid away from her she stopped caring about things in general.

It was not for Doc DeFord, a skid-row bum, to pry into or worry about. For some strange reason, she liked him and it was nice to be liked by somebody, even a girl like Sally Garcia. So he just let it go at that.

"Got a drink around, Sally?" he asked, trying not to let his teeth chatter.

"Ummm," she murmured sleepily. "In the kitchen, Doc."

He found a pint of gin in a cupboard and broke a finger nail in his haste to get the cap off.

"You're starting early, Doc," Sally called from the other room. Sally worried about him.

He rejoined her, grinning. "Hair of the dog, *ma chère*."

She laughed, low in her throat. "You sure talk crazy, using all those foreign words like that. I don't figure you at all, Doc. You look like a floater, but you got class underneath. I guess that's why I like you."

He put the drink on a chair and sat beside her.

"Hey—" She kissed him back. "Honest, honey, you ought to slow down on that gin. Ramon and Freddie had to carry you out of the joint this morning. I told them to bring you here because it was closer than Ramon's place."

That was Sally, worrying about him drinking a little too much gin when everybody knew she had troubles to spare.

Doc tried to kiss her again, but she wriggled away. "Don't be gettin' ideas this early." She got to her feet, stretched. "Look, hon, while I'm taking my shower why don't you go to Mama Lorenz's and get us a couple of bowls of hot chili? There's some money in my purse."

"No," DeFord quickly exclaimed, mentally adding up the loose change in his pocket. "To-

night it's my treat. We'll have a feast. A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou, singing beside me. . . ."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "I like it when you talk crazy like that," she said softly.

He made a sweeping bow and walked a little unsteadily out into the hall and down the stairs.

HE WAS in his middle thirties, but the past two years' steady diet of gin made him appear older. Not the most healthful diet in the world, but it had a numbing effect on the memory.

He wished he could go to a doctor and have the memory part of his mind cut out altogether. After that he would never have to recall that his name had once been Buddy Turner and he'd been a big name to anyone who knew anything about jazz and he'd been married to beautiful Donna.

That was the part he especially wanted to cut out of his mind. Donna, his wife. If he could just stop remembering the way she had felt in his arms at night and the way his heart used to go faster just seeing her walking toward him. Most important, if he could no longer remember the night

he'd found her in the tourist cabin with his arranger, Bill Cook.

Maybe it was a mistake to ever let yourself be that gone on a dame. Your playing goes to pot. You drink too much. Pretty soon you lose your band and nobody even wants to hire you as a side man any more. You've had it. You're washed up.

For the past two years he had been drifting through the better skid-row districts of Chicago, St. Louis, and Houston. He'd hocked his clarinet long ago. Then one night he had wound up in a doorway on Agnes Street in Corpus Christi. While sitting there, he heard this crazy, wonderful, God-blessed kid, Ramon, blowing his clarinet over in Freddie Garza's place—and Doc knew he'd come home. Only a musician who had once been as great as Doc could appreciate what this kid was doing.

Ramon's playing and gin. That's what Doc lived on, now. He hadn't touched a horn in two years, probably never would again. But the hunger for music was still in him and Ramon fed that hunger like no one he'd ever before heard. He loved the kid. And for an unexplainable reason, as with Sally Garcia, Ramon liked him. Agnes Street was a place of

deep friendships and violent hatreds.

Now he crossed the street into Mama Lopez's chili stand. It was very warm in the little cafe. The air was greasy with the smell of corn shucks and chili. Mama Lopez was sitting near the cash register with her plump, brown arms folded on the counter before her, supporting her weight.

"Hi, Doc." She grinned cheerfully. "You look like hell. Damn, you and Ramon were tearing down Freddie's joint last night. That boy was playing like crazy and you were living it up before you passed out." She lowered her voice and leaned toward him. "You need a couple of sticks of tea for tonight, Doc?"

Everyone along Agnes Street knew that her chili stand was just a front. Her main business was selling marijuana in the back room. Here, only a hundred miles from the Mexican border, was one of the chief ports-of-entry for marijuana. There was plenty of it floating around Agnes Street.

She went on: "I got something special tonight, Doc. My son-in-law, Guadeloupe Hernandez, is in town with some choice stuff he brought across the river. Really top grade. He's going to start bringing it over regularly. And

he's selling it for half of what Freddie Garza charges for that junk he handles."

Doc had been on Agnes Street long enough to know that Freddie Garza was the chief wholesaler of the stuff to retail peddlers like Mama Lopez. Until now he'd had something of a monopoly on the wholesale end. Most of it was poor stuff, but all the retailers could buy.

"Have you got this new stuff yet?" Doc asked curiously.

Mama Lopez shook her head. "Guadeloupe got in town this afternoon but he's afraid to bring the stuff down here to me. You know how they're watching wet-backs."

Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "Hey, I just got an idea. Wait here a minute, Doc."

She went into a back room. He heard her pick up the telephone, dial, then carry on a low conversation in Spanish. In a moment, she bustled back. "Hey, Doc, how would you like to run an errand for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"All afternoon I been sitting here wondering who I could send to get the stuff from Guadeloupe. I can't go myself because every damned cop in town knows me."

A film of perspiration suddenly

appeared on Doc's forehead. "Now wait a minute—"

"Look, I'll make it worth your while. A week's supply for yourself, and twenty-five bucks. How's that sound, eh?"

It sounded damn good. Fifteen dollars a week—which he earned for sweeping out Freddie Garza's place—didn't go far.

He thought, *one more step down the ladder for you, Buddy Turner. From skid-row bum to narcotics traffic.* But he was thinking that maybe he could get something nice for Sally.

Mama Lopez gave him taxi money and the address of a hotel a few blocks away.

The hotel was one step above being a flop-house. When Doc walked into the lobby the sleepy clerk glanced at him once without interest and went back to his comic book.

Doc walked up the first flight of stairs and along a dirty, moth-eaten carpet. He knocked on Guadeloupe's door. It wasn't locked. In fact, the latch hadn't even caught because it swung inward a few inches, just from the pressure of his knuckles.

It didn't open far, but enough for him to see Guadeloupe Hernandez.

Guadeloupe was sitting in a

chair, looking directly at him. For a second, Doc didn't move. He became acutely conscious of minute sounds in the building, a fly buzzing in the room, a radio playing faintly down the hall, a woman laughing. Without thinking clearly, he moved into the room and closed the door behind him.

Guadeloupe didn't say a word. He just sat there, glassy-eyed, his mouth hanging open a bit, his hands resting loosely on his thighs, palms up. He didn't seem in the least concerned about the flies buzzing around the blood which soaked his shirt front.

Doc touched Guadeloupe's wrist. It was warm, but there was no pulse. It didn't take a doctor to see that he was dead.

He stood looking at the murdered man for a full thirty seconds, as if he couldn't quite believe it. Then he glanced around the room. The closet door was open. A suitcase, a cheap cardboard thing, had been yanked open and clothes strewn about.

Softly, Doc pulled dresser drawers open, found them empty. He stood on tip-toes and felt the top shelf of the closet. Then he knelt and peered under the bed. It was there all right, a large cardboard box wrapped in newspaper and

tied with pieces of string, and wedged between two slats to hold it up off the floor.

He dragged it out, put it under one arm and walked out of the room, down the stairs, and through the lobby. He kept his eyes straight ahead and did not glance toward the desk where the clerk was sitting.

He was trying to figure out just what on earth had possessed him to carry the box of marijuana out of that room.

He walked for nearly an hour without coming up with an answer to that one. Finally, he sat on a curb on a deserted street corner and put the box down. Maybe, he decided, he was worrying too much about the whole thing. He was just a nondescript drifter in a good-sized city. Nobody knew him; he didn't even have a regular room.

Mama Lopez sure as hell wouldn't open her mouth or she'd expose herself to a marijuana rap. And the clerk back at the hotel wouldn't remember him from dozens of vacant-eyed, unkempt, shadowy figures that drifted in and out of hotels of that sort every day.

He found a safe place to hide the box under a rock, but first he stuffed a handful of the weed in

a pocket. On his way back to Freddie's, he rolled a cigarette with it. He lit it and puffed on it, loose-lipped, sucking a quantity of air in with the bitter-sweet smoke.

Time began to shift gears. He became suspended in a floating sensation. Things began happening in slow motion. It took at least twelve hours to walk that last block to *Freddie's*. . . .

THE music was fine. Zack, the piano player was in the groove and rocking, with the drummer laying it on right behind him. And Ramon, the poet, lifted his clarinet and said beautiful things with it.

Doc, still floating, leaned on his broom and listened to them play, *What Is This Thing Called Love?*

It was only nine o'clock, but already the place was filled. The rattle of trays and glasses almost drowned the music.

Freddie Garza came over and stood near Doc at the end of the bar. An ex-wrestler, he was a huge man with a cropped crew-cut, a jagged white scar down his left cheek. Tonight he was happy because it was Saturday night and

he was selling a lot of beer. This always made him happy, though it was really peanuts compared to his wholesale marijuana business.

He raised his right hand which had a patch of adhesive tape across it and removed a soggy cigar from between his teeth.

"You all through sweeping, Doc?"

"Yeah, all through, Freddie."

"You sweep in the back, too?"

"I swept out the back room and straightened the beer cases and I changed all the table cloths, the way you told me."

"How about the bathroom. You clean out the bathroom?"

He was sorry that Freddie remembered about the bathroom. He hated to have to clean that out.

"I forgot about that," he mumbled.

"Well, you clean that and then come around and I'll pay you, Doc. Clean it out good."

Doc went in the back and got the mop. Fifteen minutes later he returned to the bar. He was walking very slowly and carefully and the palms of his hands were sweating because now he knew who had murdered Guadeloupe Hernandez up in the Palms Hotel room. . . .

"Get it cleaned out good, Doc?" Freddie asked, grinning.

Doc swallowed hard. "Yeah, Freddie."

Freddie put his cigar back in his mouth and went to the cash register and punched the "No Sale" button. He took out fifteen one-dollar bills and counted them twice, carefully, then he handed them to DeFord.

Doc stuffed the money in his pocket and walked around to the bandstand in slow, floating steps. His hands were getting the shakes pretty bad and there was a patch of sweat on his forehead.

The music was sharp and clear to him. Each note was a separate, gleaming jewel that he could examine, fondle, and taste before going on to the next one.

Ramon, blowing the clarinet, opened his eyes and winked at him. Tonight, Ramon was wearing one of his loudest sport coats and he'd already sweated through it. His rich, curly black hair was glued to his damp forehead. He was a handsome, wonderful boy. His laughter was like his music and he laughed at everything. If you would have told him that he was a genius, he would have laughed at you. Playing was as simple as breathing to him and he never gave it a thought beyond the sport coats and women it would buy him.

Doc DeFord took out his handkerchief and wiped the patch of sweat off his forehead. He felt the sudden, crazy desire to blow a horn again. Maybe because of the sick, tight feeling inside him. He had to relieve the tension somehow, or he'd flip.

"Ramon, lemme try and blow your clary," he said, stepping up on the bandstand.

Ramon looked at him as if he'd gone off his rocker, then laughed. It struck him funnier than hell. "Hey, you are tight, Doc!" Ramon didn't even know that Doc had once been a musician. It was something Doc never told anybody. Ramon had heard Buddy Turner's records years ago, but he'd been pretty young then—and he never even dreamed of a connection between the great Buddy Turner and a skid-row bum.

Grinning good-naturedly, Ramon handed the stick to Doc, then winked at the piano player. The rhythm began to flow around Doc like a surging river, sweeping him beyond conscious thought. He lifted Ramon's horn, and started playing. It had been a hell of a long time. His lip was gone and his fingers were stiff. But it was a thing a guy never loses entirely if he'd once been as great as

Buddy Turner. Some of the rich, mellow tone, the old drive, was still there. Playing untied some of the knots in him.

Ramon and the others were staring at him open-mouthed. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw Sally Garcia pushing her way past the crowded tables toward him. There was a frantic look on her face.

She came up to him and put her icy hand on his arm, pulling at him. "Doc—Doc—"

He handed the clarinet back to a bewildered Ramon, and he went with the girl out into the back alley and stood near a garbage can.

"Listen, Doc," Sally said, her words running all together, "it don't make any difference to me if you killed Mama Lopez's son-in-law. It ain't any of my business. But—"

The sweat crawled out on his forehead again. "They found him?"

"Over an hour ago. Then they came and got Mama Lopez and took her down for questioning. I'm afraid she's going to spill about you going to Guadeloupe's room when they get to working on her, Doc. She's mad at you anyway for doing it to the kid."

"Listen, shut up for a minute,

will you? I didn't do anything to anybody."

Sally had stopped talking with an intake of her breath. After a second she let it out with a relieved sigh. "I didn't really believe you'd done it. I didn't think a guy like you could, Doc."

"How did you know about me going over there?"

"I kept waiting for you to come back with the chili. When you didn't show, I finally went over to Mama Lopez's to see what happened to you. She told me you'd gone to get a bundle of hay from that crazy Hernandez kid her daughter married. Honest, Doc, you oughtn't fool around with stuff like that."

"You're a fine one to talk."

She let that go by. "Well, anyway, a few minutes ago, news began going up and down Agnes Street about them finding the kid dead in his hotel room and the cops taking Mama Lopez down for questioning."

"Wait a minute. I tell you we don't have to worry about anything. The kid was dead when I got up there."

"They say the clerk in the lobby of the hotel saw you go upstairs and come down a minute later with a bundle under your arm. He recognized you—

he's seen you hanging around Freddie's this past month. Now they got prowler cars out combing this part of town. They'll be down on Freddie's like flies in a minute."

She pulled his arm again. "You got to get off the streets. I want you to go up to my room, Doc. There's some other clothes for you there. I bought them at the second-hand store. They'll make you look a little different. You got to stay in my room while I go downtown and buy a bus ticket for you."

"Wait a minute, Sally," he said. "Why are you knocking yourself out like this for me?"

The pale blur of her face turned away. "Well, I don't know. Because I like to hear you talk, I guess."

"That's a hell of a reason," he said gently.

IN SALLY'S room he pulled down all the shades. He peeled off his clothes, wrapped them in a bundle and put a newspaper around them. Then he dressed in the second-hand gray suit that Sally had bought. The sleeves were short but it was a passable fit. She'd thought to get a white shirt and a blue tie to go with it.

The complete outfit must have cost Sally twenty bucks. And twenty bucks was a lot of money to Sally. Somehow, he'd get it back to her.

Before he put the tie and coat on, he went into the bathroom and scraped the crust of blond beard off his cheeks. He was surprised at how thin and pale his face was underneath.

Dressed, he lay across Sally's bed with his hands over his eyes, concentrating on staying there until she returned. It wasn't easy to do because when he laid down he began thinking. And when he let himself think, his fingers began trembling and the patch of sweat came out on his forehead again. Finally, he got up, found the bottle of gin in Sally's kitchen, and finished it.

Maybe if he hadn't started thinking he wouldn't have killed the rest of that gin. And maybe if he wouldn't have swallowed the rest of that gin he wouldn't have found the courage to go back to Freddie's that night.

But he did go back.

Maybe it was because he'd known, ever since he cleaned out Freddie's bathroom, who really killed Guadeloupe Hernandez. Maybe he didn't like the idea of using Sally's money so he could

go sneaking out of town just because somebody else had stuck a knife in somebody else. Maybe it was the only smart thing to do, because he figured the cops would get to him eventually no matter where he ran—if he didn't straighten it out now.

Anyway, the more he lay there drinking the gin and thinking about it, the more he didn't like it. So he got up and went back to Freddie Garza's place.

Freddie was standing in the back alley near the garbage can smoking a cigar when Doc came down the alley. Freddie sometimes came back here during the evening to cool off and get some fresh air.

Doc walked up to him and said, "Hello, Freddie."

"Huh?" He took his cigar out of his mouth. "Oh, Doc. Where the hell did you disappear to little while ago?" In the dim light the white patch of adhesive across the back of his right hand stood out like a neon sign.

Doc DeFord looked at it and the patch of sweat on his forehead got thicker and a drop of it trickled down past his eye. "Guadeloupe Hernandez had a knife too, didn't he, Freddie? He got in a little cutting of his own before you finished him."

Freddie's cigar stopped halfway up to his mouth and hovered a moment, then went back down. Freddie dropped his left hand into his coat pocket. It was too dark to see his face.

Doc couldn't keep the words from coming out. He was almost babbling, "I saw a lot of blood on the floor around him in the hotel room. I thought it was all his until I cleaned out the rest room in your bar tonight, Freddie. You know what I found in the waste can? A blood-soaked hotel towel. It had *Palms Hotel* on it in two inch letters. I guess you wrapped your hand in it until you could get back here."

The moral of that is, Doc thought idiotically, don't swipe hotel towels.

"You damn, crazy lush," Freddie said softly. His left hand came out of his coat pocket and there was the soft, metallic whisper of a seven-inch spring blade jumping out.

There was more than one drop of sweat coming down Doc's face now. He took a step backward, feeling sick at the stomach. His befuddled mind hadn't planned a clear course of action except to run for the cops now. "You didn't like the idea of a foreigner bringing in higher quality gauge and

underselling you—did you, Freddie?”

Freddie started coming toward him, but somebody else stepped between them. Ramon had been standing just inside the back screen door, listening. Then he had pushed the door open and came between them. In the vague light, Doc saw the flash of his teeth and the plaid stripes of his coat. Ramon said amiably:

“Take it easy, Freddie. Doc’s our friend.”

“He’s no friend,” Freddie grunted. “The gin-soaked bum is making sounds like ‘cops.’” The big ex-wrestler started after Doc again. The light glinted on the sharp blade in his left fist. There was a crazy look in his eyes.

“He won’t tell the cops,” Ramon argued, walking toward Freddie. “Doc’s my friend. He won’t tell them. Not if he knows I’m the one that did it to Guadeloupe.”

Doc stopped dead in his tracks.

For a moment, everything stopped.

Doc said, “You did it, Ramon?”

“Sure.” He laughed softly and touched his right side. “The *cabron* nicked me when I stuck him. I put the towel there so it wouldn’t show until I got back.

That cut on Freddie’s hand—he got it opening a bottle.”

Tears came into Doc’s eyes. “Ramon—”

But Freddie kept moving nearer, his eyes looking crazier by the second. “I ain’t takin’ any chances on a tea-headed lush. If he talks, they’ll send me up too because I paid you to do it.”

Then his left hand made a quick jab. Doc jumped back, lost his footing and sprawled. He saw Ramon’s hand dart out of a pocket. There was another flash of steel. Ramon grabbed Freddie and whirled the big guy around. Those boys were fast with a blade. It was over before Doc could blink twice. A couple of grunts, the scrape of shoe leather and then Freddie was sprawled on his back with a switch-blade knife handle protruding from his chest.

Ramon was leaning against the building. He put his hand against his stomach. He was laughing, the way he laughed at everything. “I never did like that fat tub of pig fat, anyway.” His knees buckled.

“Ramon!” Doc got over to him, fast.

“He gave me a hundred bucks to do it to Guadeloupe, Doc,” Ramon whispered. “For a hun-

dred bucks, I coulda bought two new sport coats."

Doc was tearing at Ramon's shirt, feeling with trembling fingers the big, deep gash in his gut. He was crying a little and he wanted to tell the crazy kid that a hundred dollars was nothing—that didn't he understand he was a genius and he could have had the world at his feet and a new sport coat every day? It was some kind of terrible, grotesque joke. Throwing it away for a lousy hundred bucks, this thing the kid had that happened maybe once in a hundred million.

Ramon was still laughing. "You're my friend, Doc. I couldn't let Freddie stick you—"

Somewhere in there, an artery was sending huge spurts of warm blood over Doc's hand. Ramon's voice was growing weaker. "Hey—that was fine, what you played tonight, Doc. Why didn't you tell me you know how to blow? Play that way again for me sometime—will you, Doc . . . ?"

Footsteps hurried toward them. A girl's voice cried, "Doc. Doc!"

"Down here. Light a match. Hurry, dammit!"

Sally Garcia came out of the darkness, panting, and sank down beside him. "I been goin' nuts lookin' for you. Somebody on the

street said they saw you comin' this way. Why did you leave the room, Doc? Why—" her voice died as she stared at Ramon.

"The match. The *match!*" He wiped the tears away from his eyes.

Sally fumbled in her purse. A safety match flared. He was still groping with his handkerchief, trying to stop the hemorrhage when the match died out.

"Light another one. Quick!"

She didn't move. "It's no use," she whispered. "Look at his face, Doc. Ramon is dead."

Sally was pulling at him, trying to get him to leave. But he stood up and went back into the bar and got Ramon's clarinet, having to almost drag Sally to get there. But with the clary hugged under one arm, he let her lead him stumbling back out of the alley.

She had bought two tickets to L.A. The bus didn't leave for a couple of hours so she'd taken a room in a downtown hotel where they could wait. She called a taxi and they went down there. She kept trying to make Doc throw away the clarinet, but he took it apart and kept it under his coat.

In the hotel room, she made him sit in a big chair near a window and she helped him take off

his coat. She pressed her cool hand against his forehead. "What you told me about Freddie and Ramon might change things with the cops. The bloody towel and all."

He stared at the window into the dead, hot night. He didn't say anything. A juke box was playing jazz somewhere.

She turned the lights out, and eased into his lap. "Doc honey," she whispered, "I know how you felt about that kid. But you got to get over it."

Then she suddenly whispered, "Doc, I been tryin' the big kick lately. I only tried it a few times, but it's great, a thousand times bigger than smokin' gauge. You forget everythin' and you feel great. I got a needle in my suitcase. I'll fix us both a jolt."

She went into the bathroom. He sat there, listening to the music from the juke box. Suddenly, he put Ramon's clarinet together again and blew into it softly. It had been so long, and he'd forgotten so much. He closed his eyes and tried to play out the feeling that was inside him.

He opened his eyes and looked up. Sally was standing beside the chair with a hypodermic syringe in one hand, staring at him, wide-eyed. He laid the clarinet down,

took the needle from her, laid it on the arm of his chair, then pulled her down on his lap.

The stuff in the syringe was dynamite, he knew. She was just starting the stuff, but a few more jolts and there'd be no turning back. She'd be hooked for good.

"Sally," he murmured in her soft hair, "I keep having the craziest thought. I keep wondering—if we go to L.A. together, maybe we could make another try at—well, at everything. There's a lot of music Ramon never got around to playing. I got the crazy feeling that I'm responsible to play it for him. And I think maybe I could—now. Would you want to try it, Sally? A new start?"

She stared at him, tearfully. "Not with me, Doc," she said in a choked voice. "You wouldn't want to. Not with a girl like me."

"With a girl like you, Sally. Now, before we go any further down the ladder."

Her body was tense and trembling when he started kissing her. But after a moment, she began to relax in his arms and he had the crazy feeling that maybe there was still a chance for both of them. His hand brushed the hypodermic syringe, and it shattered on the floor with a tiny crash. . . .

Shark fishing was almost as dangerous
as angling for Al's girl

BIG CATCH

by FREDERICK LORENZ



WE WERE shark fishing at Conch Pass at the southern end of Pelican Key—Janie, me, and Vern Toller. I shouldn't of been there. I had a cold coming on

and I felt lousy. That's the reason I kept dipping into that Mason jar of corn Vern had brought along.

That was a mistake. I should of left it strictly alone. There's nothing worse than corn for getting a man in trouble, though Vern was giving me plenty of reason to get sore, fooling around Janie that way and putting his hands on her every chance he got. She was my girl, but just because he was six-four, weighed two-fifty and used to be a wrestler, he thought he could get away with murder.

We were sitting there on the beach, waiting for a bite. We had a big shark hook out in the pass baited with about a pound of ripe liver. This was April and the tarpon were running. Whenever the tarpon come, the sharks come right with them; big ones, fifteen, twenty feet long. I was sitting there hunched over and shivering from the cold I was getting, and the corn was churning around inside me like the wake from a tugboat.

Vern was horsing around with Janie, making like he was showing her some wrestling holds. I knew what he was up to, even if she didn't. Sooner or later, his big hands were going to start slipping. I got sore. Janie was a

clean, decent kid. I wasn't going to let her in for any of that stuff.

"Now cut it out, Vern," I said. "That's enough of that!"

He knew what I meant, but he gave me the big-eyes. "Enough of what, sport? What'd I do? Was I out of line, Janie?"

Maybe he hadn't done anything yet, but he was leading up to it. I said, "You know what I mean, so cut it out!"

Janie's mouth hung open. Like I said, she was a decent kid and didn't know the score. "But, Al, we were only—"

"Like hell he was *only*."

"Honestly, Al."

"He knows what I mean!"

Vern looked real innocent. "What's biting you, sport? You sound like you want to take a poke at me."

"You're damn right!" I said. "And don't give me the big-eyes. You know what I mean."

Then Janie got sore. "The trouble with *you*," she said, "is you're drinking too much! You've been mean and spoiling for a fight."

I hadn't told her I was getting a cold and felt lousy, because this was the first time she'd been shark fishing and was all excited about it and I didn't want to spoil it for her. By this time, my dander

was up and I said, "I'm *not* spoiling for a fight!"

Vern can be pretty smooth when he wants. "Hell," he said, slow and easy, "Al don't want to fight with nobody. Okay. Maybe I was out of line. I apologize. Maybe I was getting a little rough. Let's have a drink and forget it. I'll be a good boy."

He passed Janie the Mason jar of corn. Janie doesn't drink usually but she took a sip. And she gave me a hard look when I did the same. Vern tilted the jar and let a big dollop run down his neck, and handed it back to me.

"Polish it off, sport. There's only a spit left in the bottom."

I should of known he was just egging me on, but I poured it down. I'm not a natural drinker like him. He could drink all night and laugh it off. Me, I can't take it like that. It wouldn't of been so bad if I wasn't getting sick, but it was a damfool thing to do anyways. Corn isn't a thing to fool around with. I looked at Janie when I put down the empty jar, and her mouth couldn't of been thinner and harder if it had been welded.

Just then Vern yelled, "You got a bite, sport!"

I looked, and sure enough the quarter-inch nylon line was slith-

ering over the sand into the pass.

In this kind of fishing, you don't use a rod and reel. You have about a hundred yards of quarter-inch line with a wire leader and a hook at one end. Tied to the other end is a truck inner tube looped over a stump—so if the fish is too big to handle, you let it fight the stretch of the inner tube. Otherwise, you get up there with a pair of leather-palmed work gloves and haul the fish in, hand over hand like a tug of war. Sometimes, with a big one on, it can get pretty rough. A sick man with a bellyfull of corn had no right fooling around with that kind of stuff.

I had the gloves on. When I jumped to my feet, the world turned upside down and everything started to spin. The next thing I knew I was being dragged across the beach with one foot all tangled up in the line.

If Vern hadn't jumped in and gotten me out of the tangle, I'd of been out in twenty foot of water running into the Gulf at fifteen miles an hour. And that would of been the end of me. He hauled me to my feet by the armpits and dragged me back up on the beach. If he hadn't started laughing, I'd never of taken a swing at him. I tried to hit him,

but that last drink of corn tilted everything edgeways. I fell down.

He picked me up, still laughing. I tried to hit him again. He let it bounce off his hunched shoulder, saying:

"He's plotzed!"

Very dimly, I heard Janie say, "Don't *bother* with him, Vern. He's *disgusting*!"

I REMEMBER trying to say something, but then the curtain came down. When I opened my eyes, I was sprawled over the trunk of a cabbage palm that had been knocked down in the hurricane of '50. It was night now. I got up, staggered into something soft that mewled like a hurt cat. I fell down to my hands and knees and there I was only about twelve inches away from something that moved in the sand and mewled again. I went cold all over. It was a man. For a dreadful moment I thought it was Vern and I had killed him, but it wasn't.

The moon was as bright as a can of spilled white paint. I could see him. He had a blunt, triangular face, like a water moccasin, and it was raised blindly. His shirt was white and there was blood all down the left side of it.

For one sober, flashing moment I saw a burlap sack beside him on the sand, and bundles of money. All this was briefly knife-sharp, like a nightmare.

Then slowly that blunt, water-moccasin face turned toward me, and the wide, thin mouth opened. An insane gobbling came out of it. One bloody hand reached out shakily in my direction, as if asking help. It touched me—and I let out a yell and passed out.

When I came to, I was all bunched up in the front seat of Vern's car and Janie was saying, "Get him out of here, *please*, Vern. I'm sick of him!"

I tried to tell them something about the man with the blood on him, but when I opened my mouth, only a senseless jabber came out.

Janie said, "*Please* get him out of here, Vern. He's a blithering imbecile."

And then I was upstairs flat on my back in my bed and Vern was taking off my shoes.

"The man—" I said.

I felt his hands tighten on my foot. "What man, sport?"

"The man—"

"Sure, sure, but what particular man do you mean, sport?"

"The man—the money—"

"He owes you money?"

"... the beach ... the money ... the man ..."

Then, somehow or other, I heard the window open. Vern was trying to throw me out the window. It was three floors down to the hard cement walk. I clung to the sides of the window with all my strength and yelled.

The door opened and Janie said, "What's the matter with him now?"

Vern laughed. "He seems to think I'm trying to throw him out the window. All I want to do is give him a little air. He's got the DT's."

"Why do you *bother* with him?"

"Hell, honey, a guy's entitled to get drunk once in a while."

"Not the way he got drunk tonight. He was spoiling for a fight right from the beginning. Don't bother with him. He'll just try to hit you again."

"He'll be okay, honey. You go down to the car and I'll put him to bed."

I wanted to yell to her not to go because he was trying to kill me, but nothing came out but a drunken mumble. My tongue was like a mouthful of wet grits.

Disgusted, Janie said, "Don't bother with him, Vern, just put him to bed. I'm glad I found out

what he was like before it was too late."

I remember them going, and I remember crawling to the door and turning the key in the lock. And I remember later somebody trying to get in. Actually I don't know how much of the night was real and how much of it was nightmare. At one time, I was crawling around on the floor, looking for the bloody man.

The next morning, I came alive on the bathroom floor, naked and sick and shivering and with a hangover that was knotted behind my eyes like three half hitches on a straining bit with a frayed line.

I finally got some clothes on and went down to the diner on the corner and ordered a bowl of soup, some toast and a glass of orange juice. There was a newspaper on the white counter beside me. While I was waiting, I picked it up. The first thing that came out at me was a one-column picture on the front page. It was the picture of a man with a blunt, triangular face, like a water moccasin—with the caption saying that the third bank robber was found dead.

The story was about three men who had robbed a Miami bank and got away with a hundred and twenty-three thousand dollars.

Two of them had been killed in the getaway. The third robber, the one with the water moccasin face, had been found on the beach of Little Dog Key, the next Key south of Pelican Key. He had been shot in the shoulder, but the thing that had actually killed him was a broken neck. The police suspected that there had been a fourth accomplice. The money had not been recovered.

I stared at the picture on the front page until I could hardly breathe. There weren't many faces like that. It was the man I had seen last night at Conch Pass at the southern end of Pelican Key, and I remembered all that money spilled out on the sand from the burlap bag. I was sitting there, gaping, when Vern walked in and sat down on the stool next to me at the counter. He glanced at the newspaper but didn't seem very much interested.

"What a night, sport," he yawned. "And is your girl friend sour on you! Brother! She was really sore. To tell the truth, she had good reasons. You were a royal pain in the neck." He grinned. "When I was putting you to bed, you kept screeching that I was trying to throw you out the window. How's the hangover?"

He put his hand on my shoul-

der and it was as big as a leg of mutton. His mouth was grinning, but his eyes were like January ice. I tried to fold the newspaper fast, but he put his hand on it and leaned over and looked.

"Well, what do you know," he said, "they got the robber, but they didn't get the dough. That's a lot of moo. A guy'd do almost anything for that kind of money. Right, sport?"

I was in deadly danger. I could tell that from the sudden tension of his heavy fingers on my shoulder. He wanted to know how much I remembered of last night. His hand kept getting tighter and tighter on my shoulder till I felt like screaming right out loud. I grabbed his wrist, but it was just like trying to dig your fingers in a tractor tire.

"Take it easy, Vern," I said, I was sick and just about ready to fall down. "I'm only flesh and bone."

"Sorry, sport." He patted the back of my neck and the spots flew in front of my eyes. "Sometimes I don't know my own strength. I damn near killed a guy in the ring once. Sorry, sport."

He kneaded the back of my neck as though doing me a favor, but I could hear the bones grind.

He grinned at me, and it was all teeth.

"Honest, sport, this guy I almost killed in the ring—I wasn't even trying. I had a headlock and I must of turned on a little too much pressure. The guy turned blue. The ref started to beat me over the back of the head. Cops came jumping into the ring. It took four of them with brass knucks to pry me loose, on account of this guy got me sore. I just go nuts when a guy gets me sore. I don't know what I'm doing. All I wanna do is kill the punk. I can't help myself. That's the reason I quit the ring. Sooner or later, I knew I'd kill some poor jerk that got me sore."

He tightened his hand, and it brought a groan out of me. He could of let it go at that, and that's where he should of let it go. But he had to go and rub my face in it.

"I'll tell you, sport," he said. "I kind of like that Janie-girl of your's. She's sour on you anyways, so you might just as well forget her. I didn't get to first base last night on account of you being such a mess—but the next time round it might be a different story. Do me a favor, sport," he said, squeezing my arm and grinning

when I winced, "just forget about her."

He gave me another what looked like an affectionate clout across the back of the neck, and walked out. I swayed on the stool, dizzy and sick, and the counter-man came down and said angrily:

"He hurt you, pal? Want me to call the cops?"

I shook my head, but I ground my teeth and sat upright. Then I went back to the booth and called Janie.

I didn't get any further than, "Hi, honey—" when she hung up on me. I put in another dime, and this time she didn't answer at all, though it rang and rang and rang. I went out of the booth, feeling rotten. I thought of Vern with her, and those big, meaty hands of his, and there was a burning in my throat like I had swallowed something hot and bitter. I wanted to kill him!

I must of looked a little crazy when I went out of the diner because the counterman yelled something after me. I kept right on going.

Vern had found that man on the beach last night, and he had broken his neck and thrown his body into the pass to be swept over on Little Dog Key. Vern had the money. He should have been

satisfied with that. But he wanted my girl—and he wanted to rub my face in it.

I walked the streets blindly, trying to think of what I could do. I don't know where I went, but I knew that people coming down the sidewalk parted in front of me. I thought of going to the cops and telling them that Vern had the money. They would have laughed at me. I didn't have a leg to stand on. I was drunk at the time. I had no proof or anything.

I finally got hold of myself and started to figure things out. I sat down on a park bench. The money was probably burning a hole in Vern's pocket right now. He was a spender. He liked to make a splash. It would drive him crazy not being able to spend it just because of me. He was very close to realizing that now. There was only one thing I could do—make absolutely sure he had the money, and then go to the police.

But first I wanted to see Janie. She worked at the information desk in the chamber of commerce. When I walked in, her face went tight. She said:

"I don't want to talk to you."

I handed her the newspaper and pointed to the picture of the

dead man. "Did you ever see him before, Janie?"

I watched her face and there wasn't even a flicker of recognition in it. "Look again," I said. "Make sure."

"I am sure. Why?"

"I saw that man on the beach last night and there was a burlap bag full of money on the sand next to him. Vern's got the money now."

"You've been drinking again," she said contemptuously.

"I haven't. Now tell me something else. Vern took me up to my room last night. Then you came up. Did he have me at the open window?"

"Yes. He was trying to sober you up, and the only thanks he got was you yelling that he was trying to throw—" Doubt flooded her eyes, and she said angrily, "You're just saying all this because you've got it in for him."

"Do you like that guy, Janie?"

"Well I must say he was certainly more of a gentleman than you were last night!"

"He's got that money, Janie, and I'm going to prove it."

I turned and walked out and she cried after me, "Al. Al, listen! Don't get yourself in trouble. Al, please—"

I waved my hand and kept go-

ing, but it certainly made me feel a hundred percent better to know she could still worry about me. She wasn't Vern's girl by a long shot.

VERN had certain places where he sold bootleg corn. One of them was McBride's Bar on the back road down near the bay.

McBride was washing beer mugs. "Hi, Al. It's a little early for you, ain't it?"

"I'm looking for Vern Toller."

McBride swore. "Me too. That big jerk promised me five gallons of corn first thing this morning. He ain't showed yet."

I knew I was sticking my neck out, but I wanted Vern to know I was looking for him. I said, "I got a feeling he's going out of the corn business. I think he's coming in to a lot of money."

"Vern? You're crazy. He never had two dimes to rub together. Maybe a rich uncle died?"

"Somebody died."

"Are you kidding?"

"No. He's actually coming in to a lot of money, and I got it from a pretty reliable source."

"Well I'll be damned. I'll have to congratulate him the next time he comes in."

There were about a dozen other

spots I knew that he kept supplied with corn, but none of them had seen him all day. I spread the same story in each of the places, knowing that sooner or later it would get back to him and he'd come looking for me. I had an eight-inch piece of sand-plugged garden hose in my pocket, just in case he got rough. My heart was pumping heavy and sicklike, and I don't know how many times I wished I could back out of this. But I just couldn't—because of Janie.

In some of the places they just laughed at me when I said Vern was coming in to a lot of money. But in Jimmy's Bar & Grill, Howie Liggett, the hack driver, said that he had seen Vern all dressed up going into the fancy Flamingo Lounge where all the rich tourists drank.

"I thought he was flush or something," Howie said. "He was pretty high, like he'd been celebrating all day."

I walked out of there with a funny, shaky feeling in my knees. Vern had already started giving himself a taste of high life, just enough to drive him crazy when he thought of all the money he *couldn't* spend because there was always the chance that I would let it drop where he really got

Big Catch

the money from. He wouldn't stand that for long.

I was still looking for Vern at eleven that night. I kept missing him all day, and in some places by no more than ten minutes. I don't know how many times I drove by his house, but there were never any lights on. I decided to go home. I was feeling pretty sick by this time. My cold was much worse and it was really getting me down. Tomorrow was another day. I was really drooping when I walked into my room, and that was my mistake. I didn't even hear him. All I heard was the crack when he hit me on the back of the head.

The first thing I heard when I opened my eyes was thunder and it was a little while before I realized it was waves breaking on the beach. I was lying on the sand. For a minute or two I thought it was last night again, because there was Conch Pass and I could see the white nylon line stretched across the beach and into the fast-running water. Vern was standing about six feet away, his face glowing and fading as he puffed on his cigar. I moved and my whole right side was a flame of agony. I groaned. Vern turned his head and looked down at me.

"Ah hell, sport," he said, "I

sure wish I could make your last hour comfortable, but I lost my temper back there and kind of kicked the hell out of you. But don't worry. It won't be for long. We ought to have a bite any minute."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but my eyes followed the white nylon line back from the water and I went cold all over when I saw that it ended in a tangle around my right arm. The first big strike would drag me out into the water and that would be the end.

I tried to say something but my mouth was so dry I could only croak. "Cigarette," I finally managed. "Got a cigarette?" Then I prayed silently.

"I sure wish I could accommodate you, sport, but I don't bother with cheap stuff like cigarettes anymore."

"Give me a drag on your cigar then, damn you!"

"Surest thing you know, sport. Glad to do it, glad to do it."

He knelt down and as he bent over to put the cigar in my mouth, I gave him a handful of fine, powdery sand right in the eyes. He froze there for a minute, and then went over backward with a yell, clawing at his eyes. Feverishly, I stripped the line off my

arm. Vern was on his knees, almost within arm's reach, snarling and groping blindly for me.

I rolled, half-rose, and my right leg crumpled from the kicking he had given me. He was on his feet now. He heard me and came with out-stretched hands, feeling for me, savagely telling me what he was going to do when he caught me.

Then I whipped at him with the tangle of nylon line to beat him off. He caught it, gave a harsh cry of triumph, and yanked to drag me to him. I resisted for a moment, and then let him have it. He staggered and tripped in the soft sand, fighting the tangled coil of line. There was a lot of it, three hundred feet, and when he sat up, it was all over him. He flailed, just making it worse, and a shrill note of panic began to creep into his voice.

It had to come. The hook, baited with the big chunk of liver, had been out in the water quite awhile. Something struck and the line moved slowly over the sand. I sprawled out flat on my face and managed to get my left hand around it. It went limp for a second as if the unexpected resistance had surprised the fish. I squirmed around and dug in my left foot just as it started to move

again. It moved slowly, but I couldn't hold it. My right arm and right leg were no good, and I couldn't even run to the stump to throw a half hitch over it to keep the fish from dragging Vern. He felt himself going, but he was so tangled up now that he couldn't brace himself.

There was no slack line left. He screamed. Then the line tightened around his throat and the scream shut off in the middle. I tried to hold, but I couldn't with only one good hand. Slowly he slid by me on his back, his eyes bulging and his fingers tearing at the line around his throat. He slid into the water and for a few seconds he was a frenzy of arms and legs on top of it. He went under, and there wasn't a thing I could do but kneel there stupefied and watch the rest of the line crawl by. There was nothing anybody could do for him now. The end of the line slipped into the water and disappeared. . . .

After a long time, I crawled numbly to one of the fallen trees on the beach and broke off a branch for a crutch. I hobbled back to the car. I didn't care about the money anymore. I didn't care about anything. I just wanted to get away from there.

And back to Janie.

DRIFTER



by HERBERT D. KASTLE

**A drifter and his call-girl
friend figured that life
owed them a decent break.**

SHE was waiting for him when he left the plant. He glanced around nervously, but the others were busy punching out. "I told you not to," he said to the girl. "I told you I'd be at the house."

She fell in beside him, saying nothing. Their footsteps were loud in the black morning silence.

They reached the corner and stopped. He looked at her in the light of the street lamp, thinking, she's beautiful. She kept her eyes down, but when he took her arm and squeezed it, she smiled. It was amazing what that smile did to her face, and to him. He squeezed her arm again, and dropped his hand so that it touched hers.

Voices sounded be-

hind them as men came out of the plant. He heard Carl's loud laugh. Carl knew her, might recognize her. Lots of men knew her, and it was a small town.

He crossed the intersection, and she hurried to keep up with him. "I told you not to meet me," he repeated angrily. "We agreed to that."

They passed under another lamp, and walked down a dark street. As soon as the light fell behind, she clutched his hand, her fingers twining through his, her palm pressing against his. "I wanted to walk," she said, and it was as if she were crying. "I wanted to walk with you so I got up and sneaked out."

His anger faded.

"Out here it's nice," she said. "It's like we were dating. I don't want you to see me in the house any more."

"Yeah," he said. "But you owe that louse money."

"That's what he says. It's a lie. You know it's a lie."

"So I know it's a lie. But we got to wait until I save enough to get us out of here. We got to travel a long way, Jen. He's a rough article."

She stopped suddenly. "I'm not afraid of him," she said, but her voice was almost a whisper. "I

could kill him with—with a knife, or maybe iodine."

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her into a black doorway. They kissed, and the crazy thing went out of her and the crazy thing went into him. But he didn't let it fog his brain. "No," he said. "That's no way. We'll get money and blow this rotten place. In other towns the cops don't play ball. In other towns we'll be okay."

"And meantime?"

He pushed her away. "Don't you say that to me! I don't think about *meantime*. I think about later."

She pressed against him, saying, "No, no, Jerry. Don't be mad at me. I know, I shouldn't talk."

He had a minute when he could have built it up to a real anger, said mean things to her and walked away. That would be the smart move. Just walk away and hop a bus and never see her or this crummy town again. The job at the plant meant nothing, even with extra pay for night shift.

The minute went by, like all the other minutes he'd had for making a break. He couldn't leave her. She was too deep inside him now. And he still

couldn't figure how it had happened. Sure, she was pretty, and a guy nearing forty didn't get them that young—not unless he had a big office and she was his secretary, or some kid out for the green stuff. But this wasn't anything like that.

He was a drifter; machine operator or truck driver or anything else that didn't call for heavy learning. The first time he'd seen her he'd gotten the yen. It wasn't hard to satisfy, only it wasn't enough. She'd known something was different, and it got her too. And now they were tied up in this mess.

He took her hand and they walked the rest of the street and then another. Two more and they'd be on the highway. It was a small town, a lousy town. But it was tough to shake when a guy like Sid Tropp was on you.

"Jerry," she said. "Where are we going?"

He didn't know. He had his week's pay in his pocket. Eighty-one bucks. He wanted something to eat and a few drinks and a chance to talk with his girl. But the only spot open at four A.M. was Gilla's. That joint belonged to Sid Tropp, like everything else in town; like Jen.

He turned around. "I'm beat,"

he said. "I want a meal and some sleep."

She looked at him. "All right. I'll go back. Walk me back, Jerry?"

They started back. They were on a dark, tree-lined street when it happened. A fist came out of nowhere and hit him in the ear. He saw the sky swing up in front of his eyes, dark and yet touched with a hint of gray. His head hit the pavement and he rolled over and got up fast. The fist hit him again and he went down on his knees and stayed there, knowing it was no use. He'd seen them—three of them.

A hand grabbed his hair and yanked his head up. He looked at the big, slab-faced guy in the light suit. He looked past him to where a thin man held Jen by the arm, raising her on one side so she was tilted. The third man leaned against a new Caddy sedan and rubbed his hands together nervously.

"I didn't want to do this, Jen," the third man said. "I asked you to be good. But no, you had to try and sneak out on me." He stepped away from the car and his voice was troubled. "I have to look out for my interests. You represent over a thousand dollars.

Pay me and you can do what you please."

Jen said something, but had to start all over again because she couldn't seem to put words together. "How can I owe you a thousand dollars? I give you a percentage. . . . I never borrowed." She wept, standing with one shoulder pushed way up by the thin, cruel fingers on her arm.

"I've explained," Sid Tropp said. "I paid one thousand dollars to the contact who sent you here. You've been in the organization only seven months. Not long enough to work off *that* investment. And there's my per-capita fee to the police, and overhead."

"That's none of my business!" she shouted, still crying. "That talk is nothing to me."

The thin man shook her. "You're making noise," he said. He shook her again, as he would a dirty rag.

"I'll pay you back that money," Jerry said.

Sid Tropp looked at him. "Okay. Pay."

"Not now," Jerry said, and the hand in his hair gave a little tug of reproval. "We want to get married and leave town. I'll mail it to you." The hand in his hair gave a hard tug.

"Enough," Sid Tropp said

sharply. "This girl is going nowhere. You're not to see her again." He came close to Jerry, his small, round face pinched with annoyance. He was short, delicate, petulant-looking. His palm barely stung Jerry's cheek. "Let this be a lesson to you," he said. And he nodded at the slab-faced man.

Jerry tensed for the agony of a beating, but that wasn't what Sid Tropp had in mind. The slab-faced man hauled Jerry to his feet, holding his arms tight behind his back. The tall, thin man took a thick black tube from his pocket and held it in his left hand. With his right hand he shoved Jen toward the car. Sid Tropp opened the door and stepped aside.

The thin man pushed Jen. She sprawled face first into the back of the Caddy. As she fell, the thin man leaned in after her and used the rubber tube on her kidneys, pressing her face into the floor with his free hand. Her screams weren't loud.

Jerry watched her convulsive movements as the thin arm rose and fell, rose and fell. One of her shoes dropped off as she kicked. Her dress went up. She looked like a little girl getting spanked.

Jerry didn't try to move. Once, a window opened across the street

and a man called, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," the slab-faced man said. "Police business."

"Yeah?" the voice said.

"Call the station," the slab-faced man shouted. "Shut up and call the station. Or do you want I should come over there?"

The window went down. Jerry stood quiet, and then it was over. The thin man put away his rubber tube and bent down. He straightened and said, "She's out."

Sid Tropp walked around the other side and climbed in the front seat. The slab-faced man let Jerry go, and got behind the wheel. The thin man shoved Jen's legs inside the car, climbed over her and closed the door. The Caddy started smoothly and rolled away. It made a turn at the corner and was gone.

Jerry began to walk. He kept remembering how her shoe had fallen off. He went to Gilla's and drank rye until eight.

He didn't go to work the next night. He called the plant and told Mick, the foreman, that he was sick.

"Yeah," Mick said. "Try tomato juice. Lots of it."

Jerry laughed into the mouth-piece and hung up. He went back to his room and lay down on the

lumpy bed and thought of what Mick had said. They knew a drifter, a drinker, a loose man with a buck. They were right. He'd drunk too much rotgut, danced too many chippies, thrown more craps than sevens. He'd spent his life in small towns and small-town dives. He was thirty-nine; he was tired of the rat-race.

Maybe that's why Jen had hit him so hard. He'd paid his money and walked around the parlor, looking at the girls, ready to make his choice. He'd seen her, small, slouched in a corner. She was a kid, a pretty kid, a tired and frightened kid. Later, he learned she'd been in trouble in her home town and some guy had paid the bills, and then told her she had to work off the fee. So she'd been sent to Ammerville. Lady Sylvia had shown her the ropes, and Sid Tropp had collected. Sid Tropp always collected.

Jerry got up and walked to the window and lighted a cigarette. He smoked and looked out at the shadows of yards and clothes-lines and fences. He could earn his eighty, ninety bucks a week regular, if he wanted to. He could get a small apartment and he and Jen could live there, and it wouldn't be half bad. But Jen couldn't walk out of town. An-

other beating like last night's and she couldn't walk, period.

He turned and went to the dresser. He opened the pint of rye and drank. It was a poor substitute for someone's face under his fists. It was no substitute for Jen's warm arms and soft voice. He kept remembering how her shoe had fallen off.

He walked to the window, then to the bed, then back to the window. He stopped and he was breathing hard. But he told himself the score. There was no way for him to help her. He didn't have a thousand, and even if he had Sid Tropp wouldn't let her go. She was worth a lot more; she was good for ten years.

He made up his mind, and got his suitcase from under the bed. He began to throw things into it, and he didn't stop until his dresser was empty. He sat on the suitcase and got the clamps shut. Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," he said. The door was locked and he had to get up and open it.

It was Carl. The squat assembler was dressed for work.

"I'm not going," Jerry said.

Carl looked past him at the suitcase on the bed. "Pulling out?"

"Yeah."

"Good thing," Carl said. "You got some mean people on you."

Jerry waited.

"I seen you with that—that girl," Carl said. "And now there's a thin guy standing across the street smoking cigarettes. Louis—the one who hangs around Lady Sylvia's and Gilla's and anyplace else where Sid Tropp has a hand. He's mean."

Jerry nodded. "Mean, yeah. All of them." He thought of that thin guy's arm rising and falling, and of the same guy standing just across the street. "Mean."

"Don't get that way," Carl said. "Pull out like you said. What's that girl to you? She's only a—" He stopped then because Jerry was at the suitcase, taking out the long, ugly automatic.

"Hey," Carl said. "Hey, that's a bad thing, boy."

Jerry walked to the closet and put the gun in his coat pocket. "It's a Mauser," he said seriously. "It's a war souvenir. It reminds me that I'm in a free country."

"Yeah. But that guy won't try to stop you, if you're pulling out."

"That's right."

Carl turned and walked into the hall, leaving the door open. He went down the stairs fast, and the front door slammed. Jerry put on his coat and took out the gun

and went back to the suitcase. He found the clip of bullets, wrapped in a greasy rag in a cigar box. He loaded the gun and put it in his pocket and left the room.

When he came out into the street, he saw the thin man. The thin man was smoking a cigarette, leaning against the lamp post, looking like he owned the world and everyone in it. The cigarette came up to his lips, went down, came up again, went down again. The hand rose and fell, rose and fell. Jerry's mind rang with the sound of Jen's muted screams.

Jerry crossed the street and went right up to Louis. Jerry didn't look around to see if anyone was watching; just pulled the gun and stuck it into the thin man's stomach and said, "See the alley near the grocery store?"

The thin man dropped his cigarette. "Listen, don't be a fool."

"Walk to that alley, Louis."

"Listen, Sid Tropp will kill you. I mean kill you."

Jerry told him what he could do with Sid Tropp.

Louis walked to the alley. Jerry pushed him along in the darkness. By the time they reached the low wooden fence in back, Louis was almost crying. "Listen," he said, "I'll give you two hundred bucks.

I got it in my wallet. It's yours. I didn't do nothing but follow orders."

Jerry spun him around and ripped open his coat. He found the blunt-nosed .38 in a shoulder holster and threw it behind some garbage cans. He couldn't find the rubber tube. "Louis," he said, and hit him with his left hand, in the pit of the stomach. Louis bent over, and Jerry hit him with the Mauser, bringing it up into his face. Louis fell back and his head struck the pavement. But he still made crying sounds and his arms moved feebly to protect his head from further damage.

Jerry looked at him. Slowly the white rage melted away. Jerry started to think again. He had to get his suitcase and walk to the highway and try to hitch a ride out of town. He couldn't wait until eight-thirty and the morning bus. Someone might have seen him and Louis.

Suddenly, he was scared. He didn't want to die, and that's what could happen if Sid Tropp got to him. There were stories of the men Sid Tropp had killed. Bodies dumped in alleys, lakes, forests.

Louis said, "No more! You'll kill me."

Jerry looked at Louis, thinking of Jen and the thick black tube.

Louis was deep in hysteria. "Listen, it's finished between you and Jen. She's dead. What good—" And then he realized he'd made a mistake.

Jerry was down with him, holding him by the throat. "You're lying."

"I'm lying," Louis said quickly. "I figured to stop you."

Jerry felt his stomach squeeze tight. The saliva drained from his mouth and his voice got thick. "You hit her in the kidneys. She could be dead."

"No. It was an angle. Please."

Jerry looked into the thin man's eyes and saw only the fear of death. He stood up; then swung down hard with the Mauser. Louis went limp. Jerry ran out of the alley.

He ran down Tank Street, and the neon lights flashed red and blue and yellow in his eyes. The bars and dance halls and pool rooms were booming.

He saw the cop leaning against a flashy convertible, talking to a girl inside, and he slowed to a walk. He walked past the cop and to the corner and around the corner. Then he ran again and reached the house. He stopped at the bottom of the four stone steps, looking up at the door. He didn't know who was inside. He

didn't know if anyone beside Tropp and his two thugs would give him trouble. But he had to know about Jen.

He went up the steps and rang the bell. The girl attendant opened the door and gave him a professional smile. "This way, sir. Lady Sylvia is receiving in the parlor."

"I don't want to go to the parlor," he said, and pulled out his wallet. He found a ten and pushed it at the girl. "I want to see Jen."

The girl looked at the bill, but didn't take it. "Jen isn't here, mister."

He closed the door behind him, put his right hand in his pocket and gripped the Mauser. He released the safety with his thumb. The short foyer was dimly-lit, quiet and empty. He looked at the staircase ahead of him, and at the door on his right. There was music coming from that door.

"She's not in the parlor?" he asked, dodging the real question.

The girl saw his hand, saw his face, and was suddenly frightened. "No, sir. I told you—"

"Yeah. Then she's upstairs but not available."

"No, sir. She's not in the house. Ask Lady Sylvia."

"I'm asking you," he said, and

his voice shook. "She works here. She's always here this time of night. Is she sick?"

"Why don't you let me get Lady Sylvia?" the girl asked, and made a little movement toward the door. But she stopped when he shook his head.

"Answer me," he said. "Is she sick?"

The girl shook her head and her eyes filled with tears. "I didn't see her. Honest. She was here last night, but I didn't see her this morning or all day or now. Lady Sylvia told me to say she's not here any more."

"She's dead," Jerry whispered.

"Honest, I don't know," the girl said, and the tears spilled down her cheeks.

He didn't know what to do.

The parlor door opened and a man stood in the doorway, talking to someone inside the noisy room. Jerry moved to the girl and took her arm and walked her to the staircase. He said softly, "We'll go to Jen's room."

"There's no one in it," she said. "It's empty. I took a look myself just an hour ago. I wondered."

They reached the second floor, where the rooms were. He said, "Where is she?"

The girl didn't know he was talking to himself, and she broke

down completely, crying so hard that he felt the sobs travel through her body and shake her. "These rooms," he said, "they all used by the girls?"

"All but one. That's Mr. Tropp's office at the end." She pointed.

He started for that door, leaving the girl behind.

"Don't," she said, and ran down the first few steps.

He looked back, wondering how she'd managed to escape him, knowing he wasn't doing this right.

"They'll kill you," she said. "I mean it."

He stared at her. "Go home. Don't stop to tell Lady Sylvia. I'll be listening." He jerked the Mauser.

She turned and ran down the rest of the steps. He heard the front door open and close.

He walked down the hall until he reached the door. He stood there, then put his hand on the knob and turned it. He opened the door and walked inside.

Sid Tropp was sitting behind an old desk, a ledger open before him, a pencil in his hand. He looked up and placed the pencil on the ledger. "This is too much," he said. "This is really too much."

Jerry said, "Where's Jen?"

A door on Jerry's left opened a crack. He glimpsed the shape behind it and he tightened his finger on the trigger. "If he kills me," he said, "he'll have to do it perfect. If he doesn't put out all the lights at once, I'll be able to squeeze this trigger. I spent three years with a rifle and I know."

For the first time, Sid Tropp's eyes dropped to the gun. "Phil, hold it," he said, and there was something besides petulance in his voice. "All right," he said to Jerry. "Put your gun on the desk and I'll let you go."

Jerry shook his head.

"You want to die?" Phil said from the door.

"Ask Mr. Tropp," said Jerry.

Sid Tropp breathed heavily. "She's dead," he finally admitted. "She died about eight this morning. Louis hit her too hard." He shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"You're lying," Jerry said.

"She's in the next room," Tropp said. "I was waiting—"

Jerry said, "Show me and I'll leave."

Tropp looked at the side door and nodded. Phil disappeared. Jerry listened to the dragging sounds coming from the other room. The side door opened wide,

and Phil dropped something across the door saddle. Jerry gave it one quick look. It was Jen.

"One of those things," Tropp said.

Jerry couldn't see too well, but he squeezed the trigger twice. Tropp fell out of his chair. "Go on," Jerry said, not turning. "Go on, Phil."

"Put it down," Phil said.

Jerry obeyed without thinking. Thinking was finished forever.

"Get out of here," Phil said. "I'll give you an hour, and call the cops. But they won't do anything. I'll see they don't." He breathed heavily. "I'm the top now. The top."

Jerry walked out. He didn't thank Phil. He had nothing to thank him for. He went back to the rooming house and got his suitcase and walked to the highway. He hitched a ride to the next town and got off and went into the first bar he saw. He had rye with beer chasers, and soon a hefty blonde was beside him. He stayed in the bar until it closed; then ditched the blonde and found a cheap hotel.

He lay in the small, drab room, staring up at the cracked ceiling, tanked to the ears. And still sleep didn't come.

The lady scientist had brains—but she didn't use them.

TWO LITTLE BULLETS



by AD GORDON

HE WAS a mild-mannered man, thin and round-shouldered, and his eyes, hair and clothes were all a tired gray. Still, he managed a mild curse as he climbed the

three flights of stone steps in the apartment house building. Outside, rain pelted the Washington, D.C. pavements.

It was not the climb nor the wet night that bothered him. He just didn't like playing messenger boy for his wife. He rapped on the door—3C it said—and it is possible that he rapped harder than usual.

"Who is it?" a voice asked softly.

"Professor Calhern," he said, then amended, "Professor *George* Calhern." His wife was Professor Calhern, too. Antoinette Calhern, professor of nuclear physics, head of department, important, honored. *The* Antoinette Calhern. His wife. Too busy for being a wife now. Too busy for anything. Too busy to deliver her papers. *Too* busy, Calhern thought. Then he felt a twinge of shame. The papers had to be delivered. And if she was too busy, why, then, it was only normal that he run them. Secret papers, from Antoinette's physics lab straight to the government boys who translate such documents into nuclear weapons. Still, it galled him to be her messenger boy. He felt less like a man.

The door opened. It was the short, red-faced one this time, Cal-

hern thought. Sometimes it was Grubb, the beet-face; sometimes it was the cadaver, whose name he had never learned. He preferred the cadaver.

Calhern walked in. A radio was blaring. A radio was always blaring when he did business with Grubb or the cadaver. "Nobody is likely to hear us," Grubb had once confided. "All hush-hush, you understand." Calhern had nodded. He understood. But always, loud cheap music.

He kept his hand at his collar, even though his coat was wet. Calhern had to put off the possibility of sitting a moment. He couldn't stand socializing with these people. "How are you?" he said, mechanically.

Grubb rubbed his hands together. The radio screamed away. "In the groove," Grubb said. Hell, Calhern thought, what does government work do to a man? Didn't Grubb know that *in the groove* went out with the big apple?

He went about his business quickly, to get it over with. A plane would be waiting, to whisk him away from the top-secret men and back to the even more secret Antoinette. He scowled, standing there, and for the moment he

hated his wife. Usually he just mildly disliked her. He took from the inside breast-pocket of his suit jacket a long thin envelope.

"Here," Calhern said. "Antoinette says it's the wrap-up of Project X. That is, from her end of things." Then he added, as he always did, "Not that I know what she's talking about, of course." And then, once more as protocol seemed to demand, he winked.

Grubb winked back. "Fine, Professor, fine. I'm sure your wife has done a great job here. You don't know how the government appreciates her unflagging devotion to the—" He stopped and then continued—"her unflagging devotion to advancing our nation's defense efforts." Calhern sighed soundlessly while the radio filled the room with its inanity. For a moment he had been sure Grubb was about to say, "devotion to the cause," but apparently that cliché was taboo.

Grubb leaned closer confidentially. "A moment, please," he said. Then he turned and went to the other room. Calhern had never been inside the other room. There was surprising silence for a moment, and then a voice broke in on the radio. Calhern listened to a few words and then his mind

swung away. It was the robbery of a bookie syndicate—some astronomical sum of money—right here in Washington. Calhern forgot about it. The music commenced its blaring. Grubb returned.

He carried a brown briefcase, undistinguished, a cheap leather affair with a zipper that ran only across the top. "Professor," Grubb began, and then he cleared his throat. Calhern knew the routine was beginning. This was Project Y. "You understand, don't you, Professor, that what I—we—the government is entrusting you with is of such vast importance to the security of all of us that I cannot possibly begin to convey the absolute need on your part for complete unceasing vigilance and care." It was not a question. Calhern wanted to say, *if you can't begin to convey the need, don't try. I understand. I'm as good a patriot as you—or as Antoinette. I'll guard your documents. With my life, if needs be.*

Instead he nodded, his tongue flicking dry lips. Grubb droned on, and the radio voice returned to talk more about the bookie robbery, and then the music came back. Finally Grub paused and said, "Now—do you understand?" The last three words were always

softly spoken, yet Calhern felt power behind them, and for a brief second he felt a chill. Then he heard the rain striking the windows and he thought—why not a chill, it's a cold wet night.

He heard Grubb saying, "Have you checked on your flight?"

Calhern said, "Yes. They're flying. At least, they were a half hour ago."

Calhern hefted the briefcase and turned away from Grubb, away from the blaring music, the sweat-filled room. He walked into the Washington, D.C. night, into rain and chill, and he thought briefly that the satchel weighed more than one would expect. Then he forgot everything when he saw the cab. He hurried toward it. . . .

Behind him, upstairs, looking from his window, Grubb watched, his mouth cruel and hard. The radio, muted now, spoke again of the syndicate theft. Grubb waited until Calhern was swallowed in the night before he turned back to his room. He said aloud, to the radio speaker, "Two hundred thousand dollars." He clicked off the set, and there was a sneer fixed on his cruel mouth. He thought, the Russians will pay a hell of a lot more than two hundred thousand for Antoinette's

document. Nearer to two *million*. Of course, Antoinette would cut in on a big piece of it, but he'd get the major share. His was the big risk.

And Calhern? What about him? Grubb smiled to himself. He'd get his. Six ounces of trinitrotoluol, TNT, time-fused for two hours from now, when Calhern would be eleven thousand feet in the air.

CALHERN was not the only man walking that wet block. There was another figure, coming from the opposite direction. His name was Hennessy, though the wanted-for-robbery cards in the post offices and police stations all over the country listed a half-dozen aliases. He, too, carried a leather briefcase. Not a new one, either, but nice enough. Nice as hell, Hennessy thought, patting the case. Two hundred gees nice, that's how. Unless the newspapers were lying about the syndicate haul. They often did, making it read bigger and better. Still, one hundred gees would be plenty, and it felt like more in his hand than that. It hefted nice. Real nice.

Now Hennessy had to get the hell out of this city, with its

blasted cops, and tough gunmen looking for him.

Well, he'd get out. He'd holed up all afternoon and nobody had nosed him out, and now he walked around, free as the stinking air. The rain helped, making everybody look alike, wet and dark and huddling. To hell with it, he thought. He wasn't going to be a sheep. He threw his shoulders back and walked along, whistling, a man with a cap and a leather jacket and heavy dark slacks and a briefcase. And then his luck—good all day—got even better.

He turned a corner, and there it was just waiting for him. An empty taxi cab, its lights on, motor purring. There was a diner at the corner, and Hennessy played his luck for all it was worth. He figured the cabby was in the diner, dry and warm, getting some coffee and swapping words with a frizzy-haired counter girl while the rain eased up. Hennessy looked at the sky. The breaks were starting to show, though the rain still fell. He looked down the street. A tall shambling man in a gray topcoat came carefully along the wet pavement. Then he must have seen the cab; he started to hurry, his feet making short slapping trotting steps.

Hennessy let the dice roll. He opened the front door of the cab, tossed his satchel on the seat next to him and sat behind the wheel. Then he remembered. He twisted and leaned into the rear of the cab, reading the identification, studying the picture. He ought to be playing the horses, Hennessy thought, with luck like that. The cabby's name was as Irish as the blarney stone, his face blurred and indistinct as a passport photo. Tim O'Farrell. Well, Hennessy thought, another alias. Let's go, Timmy b'ye.

The tall shambling man approached the cab and tapped on the window. Hennessy said, "Where to, Mack?" and the dice kept coming up seven. The man said, getting in, "The airport." Hennessy turned the corner, thinking *I'm home free*.

He still had to do some throwing. He said, throwing his dice, "Helluva night for flying. Think the field's shut down?"

The dice came up seven.

"No," the man said shortly. "I called forty-five minutes ago. They've got my plane scheduled to go on time."

"What time's that?"

The man sighed. He sounded as though he were used to talkative cabbies. "Eight-ten," he said.

Then he added apologetically, "I've got seven-thirty now. Do you think we'll make it?"

Hennessy thought, I'd carry you piggy-back and get there on time. "Can't miss," he said. Then he paused, as if in reflection. "That is, if you don't have any big delays at the field. Do you have to check your bag?" He watched the man in the rear-view mirror. He carried a briefcase on his lap.

"No," the man said.

Hennessy watched him look down at his satchel. "Got your ticket already?" Hennessy asked.

The man patted his breast pocket. "Yes," he said.

Well, Hennessy thought, what else was there?

They neared the airport. Now he had to be careful. He pulled the cab off the main drag, down a dark street.

"Where you going?" the passenger said.

"Don't worry, Mack," Hennessy said. "Leave her to me. We'll take short cuts." He turned the cab into a scabby desolate road, scarcely wider than an alley, stopped abruptly and hopped out. He opened the rear door with the hand that held his satchel and with his other, dragged the passenger out of the cab and into the dim shadows.

All the man said was, "Say, wh—" when Hennessy dropped his satchel and hit him as hard as he could, alongside the jaw, just below the left ear. The man dropped, and Hennessy, losing his footing on the slick ground, fell on top of him. Cursing, he turned the man over, reached into the breast pocket for the plane ticket, picked up the briefcase that lay next to the passenger, and leaped back into the cab.

He never noticed, even when he was putting it into the luggage compartment over his head on the plane, that the satchel, rain-spotted and filthy, was just a trifle less heavy than it had seemed before. All he knew was that no man ever threw so many sevens in one day. He knew that when the law of averages finally caught up with him, it would catch up with a bang. . .

Antoinette Calhern looked at her watch. Seven-fifteen. That meant eight-fifteen in Washington. The plane was up.

She looked at the window, coated with driving rain. A lousy black night, she thought, a three-legged double-dyed lousy night. She went into the kitchen and poured some rye into a pot. Then

she went to the refrigerator and took out the ice-cube tray. She plunked five cubes into the pot of rye. She poked a cube with her finger, studied the mixture for a short minute, then took a water tumbler from the sink and filled it with the whiskey from the pot. She returned to the living room and looked at her watch. It was seven-twenty. She took a long swallow of the rye.

The phone rang.

She set the glass down so hard some rye leaped over the edge and made a puddle on the coffee table. She ran to the phone. By the time she got there, it had rung exactly three times.

"Hello?" she said.

"Tony," the man's voice said, "oh, Tony, darling. I can't stand the suspense."

She swore once, foully. "I told you not to call until it—it was all over."

"I can't help it," he said. "I can't stand it. So much at stake."

"You can't stand it," she yelled.

"Tony darling," he said, "I'm not cold like you."

She knew that to be true. She shivered once. He wasn't cold at all. He was fire. And after tonight, after six ounces of TNT blew a plane to nothingness, he was hers. Him and maybe fifty

thousand dollars — when Grubb sent her her share. Then she could tell those Commie punks that she was through. She glanced at the tiny wall safe. If they didn't like it, there was nothing they could do. She could hang them all, with what was in her wall safe.

"Please," she said. "Goodbye, now. Don't call again tonight. For all I know, his plane was grounded."

"Oh," he said, "it wasn't. I called the airport. The plane left on schedule."

"Dammit," she said, "I told you not to call the airport." Had she seen herself then, she'd have known that she was fire, too, a tall black-haired woman, red-lipped and full-bodied, with an ache to be loved that was tearing her in two.

"You're right," he said. "I won't bother you again. But please call me when you know for sure."

She hung up and went back to her tumbler of rye. She drained it in the next half hour. Then she drained a second tumbler in the following hour. But she stayed cold sober and she cursed more often when she looked at her watch.

At nine-thirty (ten-thirty Wash-

ington time, two hours and twenty minutes after flight time, twenty minutes after the plane should have blown up) she turned on the radio. The nine-thirty news broadcast mentioned nothing.

At nine thirty-five the phone rang. She let it ring.

At eleven (nearly two hours after the plane should have blown up, and twenty minutes after the plane was due to arrive) she called the airport.

"I'm sorry," the young man said. "But Flight 108 is reported overdue." He started to rush on. "That doesn't mean any—" She hung up. Overdue! The sweat came pouring out of her, the relief and the tears. She called him.

"Hello?" he said.

"The plane," she said. "It's—overdue. That means—you know."

There was silence for a moment. "Yes, Tony," he said gently. The phone clicked.

She smiled to herself. She poured herself another glassful. Now the drink was catching her. Good, she thought. Let it knock me dead.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. It was he, coming to her—forever. They kissed deeply and thought how foul they were, and how wonderful. . . .

PROFESSOR GEORGE CALHERN came to, his face in the gutter. His jaw ached. So did his head. But for a brief second, all that mattered was the briefcase. Then he saw he was lying on it. It was filthy, but he didn't care. A thin red film of rage sat behind his eyes. Just because Antoinette was too damn busy, he had to be beaten up and humiliated. He felt like smashing her sullen face.

Eventually, that night, he got another plane ticket with the remaining dollars in his wallet. (*Funny, he thought, the crook didn't take the wallet.*)

He went through the passage-way to the plane and up the steps, ticket clutched in his hand. He went through the aisle to his seat, scarcely conscious of the stares of other passengers, looking at his mud-stained coat and the purple bruise on his face. He was thinking only that the mud had made the satchel slightly heavier. . . .

It was five in the morning that George Calhern soundlessly opened the door of his home. That was habit. Had he thought about it, he might have slammed the door, though his anger no longer boiled.

He had started to tug at the fingers of his gloves when he no-

ticed a man's Chesterfield and Homburg on the couch, the two glasses, the bottle, Antoinette's spike-heeled slippers on the floor. And with the deliberate movements that had marked his life, he studied the little scene and came up with the correct conclusion. He pulled his gloves on tight, walked quietly over to the desk and took out a small automatic that Antoinette had insisted they get when neighbors' homes around them had been robbed.

He took the weapon and went into the bedroom. He squinted his tired gray eyes down the brief barrel of the gun and pulled the trigger twice. He did not care terribly that he did not fire the gun very accurately; the importance of the act was merely in the doing, not in achieving any final end. Then he picked up the briefcase (for no reason that he quite understood, except that it seemed foolish to walk out on his life with nothing of the past in his hands) and left. . . .

When the police arrived fifteen minutes later—summoned by a neighbor of the Calherns who had heard the shots, phoned the police and then crouched under his bed—they found the two lovers, the pain of their wounds only slightly temporized by the alcohol in their

brains. Antoinette had been shot fleshily but not critically in her splendid chest, her lover along the top of his skull, the bullet ploughing a bald furrow.

They were hustled off to the hospital in a police ambulance. The police then searched the house. Eventually they found the wall safe, and cracked it. The F.B.I. was called in. Two days later, a spy ring in Washington was likewise cracked and a member of the Russian embassy deported. Grubb and the cadaver went to the federal penitentiary for thirty years.

And every so often—the newspapers report—bills from the Washington syndicate robbery are picked up in various parts of this country and other countries. But nobody with the bills ever bears the slightest resemblance to Hennessy, the man they know responsible for the theft. Once they questioned a man in Switzerland, a tanned, gray-haired retired American businessman with stoop shoulders, married to a stout European woman whom he ordered around unmercifully. It was obvious to the Swiss police—sensitive to such matters—that the woman adored him, as did their two tiny children. The police never bothered him again.

THE FIRST MAN HANGED

He was on the jury to hang his rival—for a murder he committed.

by EDWARD A. HERRON

I CONDEMNED the first man hanged in the First Judicial Division, Territory of Alaska.

Not that it was hard. Magnus Johnson was eager to be done in. He stood up in the courtroom, just before the jury was sworn,



and he yelled, "I killed the dirty rat, Judge. Why waste the Government's money with a trial? I killed him, and I'm glad. Let's get it over with."

Old Judge Baar banged his gavel. "Keep quiet, you. . . . Swear the jury."

I stood up with the other eleven, and we swore we'd try to arrive at a just verdict. Over John-son's shoulder, in the front row of spectators, I saw his wife, Cornelia. Our eyes met, and she touched her hand to the stray lock of blonde hair that fell upon her forehead. It was her way of talking to me. The way we'd talked in secret for a year. And the message she'd given was as plain as though it had been written upon a tablet.

We were excused for the day right after we were sworn in. Everyone, the judge included, was exhausted in the effort to get up a jury. Every one of the challenges had been used, and I was the bottom of the barrel from the jury list.

I waited a while for the courtroom to clear. Then I slipped out of the door of the Federal Building, out to the rain-slick street, and up over the hill to the dirt road going back into Silver Bow Basin. Behind me the town was

wet wood clinging to the mountainside as though it were afraid of tumbling off into the water.

There was a deep cut between the two mountains overhanging the town. A mile back was virgin wilderness.

I turned to the left where two spruce were twisted in a wind embrace, and climbed the mountain. There was a flat space, a soft, sheltered spot beneath the spruce, shielded on three sides by outcroppings of granite. Ahead was the V-cut in the mountains that framed the waters of Gastineau Channel. And beyond was the deep green of the spruce on Douglas Island. There, I waited.

She came. There never had been a love like ours.

Finally she whispered, "Paul, what shall I tell them when they call me to the stand?"

"Exactly what you told me. No more, no less. Say it again."

She held her head back, with her eyes closed, and she whispered tensely, "I was northbound on the *Alaska Star*, coming back from Seattle to my home in Juneau. On the second night out, the room steward came into my stateroom and. . . ." She started trembling, holding me tightly while she shook. She sucked in her breath in a long, shuddering sigh. "Paul

—must I? Isn't there some other way?"

"Not unless you want them to hang Magnus. With your story, he'll go free." I swallowed and forced the words out, "Protecting the honor of his home."

She pulled away, and her voice took on an odd note, almost a questioning tone. "But they can't, Paul. They can't hang him. They need a unanimous decision. And with you on the jury, they can't get one—can they, Paul?"

"No," I assured her hastily. "They can't. Not unanimous."

Then we kissed again, and we went together down to the deserted road. She went ahead. I followed a short distance behind, far enough back that I could fade into the shadows if some night hikers should come along the road, and yet close enough so that she could feel my presence. She was timid, and afraid of the dark, and of the animals that ranged the mountains.

When the trial got underway the next morning, Magnus made a spectacle of himself. He twice rose to his feet yelling he was guilty and asking to be sentenced.

The second time, the District Attorney protested to Judge Baar, "The defendant is deliberately acting like an insane person. He

believes he can escape his punishment by being committed to the asylum down in Morningside."

Judge Baar rapped wearily with his gavel. "Get on with your witness."

It was one of the city policemen: "The defendant ran into the station and said he'd just shot a man. We sent a car down and found the body."

Then Doc Carter, the coroner: "The victim died from two bullet wounds; one in the chest, the other in the temple."

Captain Dennis MacDonald, skipper of the *Alaska Star*: "We pulled into the pier about five in the morning. Still dark. The steward had permission to leave ship and report back by noon. It was seven o'clock when I got word he'd been shot dead."

The superintendent of the gold mine: "Magnus Johnson has been employed as a watchman in the mill since we've been shut down. Once each week I spend the night with him, checking motors, drive belts, generators. Long about five o'clock this morning, the two of us were standing by the open window and we see the lights of this ship coming around the rock dump. It was about an hour later Johnson must've got to thinking . . ."

"Never mind what he was thinking," Judge Baar interrupted. "Tell us what happened."

"Johnson blew for me, and when I got down to his floor, he asked if he could go home. Said he was sick."

"What time was that?"

"Six o'clock. I marked his time."

"Did he mention the name of the dead man?"

"He didn't have to. Everybody in town knew about his wife and that steward on the *Alaska*—"

"Answer, yes or no."

"No."

"Excused."

Another of the city policemen took the stand: "We found the footprints Johnson made when he entered the basement door of his own house. His fingerprints were on the basement closet where he lifted out the gun. There were fresh mud tracks up the wooden steps leading to the living room. He must've thrown open the door, leveled the gun, and fired."

The defense lawyer started to object, then shook his head hopelessly. Magnus Johnson was on his feet calling in a loud voice, "It's true. Every last word of it is true. What are we waiting for?"

Judge Baar banged his gavel, and his voice came out icy. "Mr. Johnson," he said, "this is a court

of law, and under the law you are charged with the crime of murder in the first degree. You want a quick verdict, and you're going to get it. But if you continue to act the fool, I'll set you down in the jailhouse until the next session next spring. Now sit down, and shut up!"

That ended it for the day, and the judge let us jurors go with the usual admonition to talk to no one about the case. Just before she left the courtroom, Cornelia looked at me, her eyes wide and appealing, and her fingers lifted to touch the strand of blonde hair.

She was waiting on the mountain.

"What is it?" I demanded. "What's wrong? Don't you know it's dangerous—"

"I was lonesome," she said simply. "Frightened. I just wanted to be near you for a little while. I'll be called tomorrow—and I'm terribly afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"If they ask me what the steward said when he came into my stateroom—that he knew about you and me—and that he was going to tell Magnus?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "How could they possibly ask something they know nothing

about? There was only one person who knew—and he's dead."

"Yes, yes." She shook her head, and brought the palms of her hands slowly down over her cheeks. For a moment, in the fast-fading light, I thought she looked terribly old. "I don't like to see Magnus hurt," she whispered. She bit her lips. "Oh, it makes no sense, I know, but to see him acting the way he does, thinking he's going to die for me, and being glad he's doing it for me—Oh, Paul, Paul," she cried, "if only he'd stop loving me! If only he'd turn against me and hate me."

"You're getting hysterical," I said abruptly. "Go home and take some pills to make you sleep. You should be fresh and alert when you go on the stand in the morning."

"Yes, Paul."

She went away with her head bowed. I let her get far ahead on the road and let the night swallow her. There was no use taking a chance on being seen. . . .

I WAS rigid on the end seat in the jury box when she was called to the witness stand next morning.

"Mrs. Johnson," the defense lawyer asked quietly, "does the

name of Rolf Pentecost mean anything to you?"

"Yes, it does. It's the name of the man my husband shot."

There was a gasp throughout the courtroom. I relaxed, breathed easier, and slumped back comfortably in the soft seat.

"Where did you first see Rolf Pentecost?"

She lifted her head and half-closed her eyes like a child reciting in school. "I was northbound on the *Alaska Star*, coming back from Seattle to my home in Ju-neau. On the second night out, the room steward, Rolf Pentecost, came into my stateroom and—" She choked on the words.

"Did he molest you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you report him to the captain?"

"I was ashamed."

Her voice was a whisper, and the court reporter lifted his pencil and demanded, "What was that?"

"I was ashamed," she repeated. "I told no one but my husband. And I told him the steward said he was coming again to my home on the next trip northbound, at a time my husband would be at work."

"And you told no one? You didn't go to the police?"

"No." She looked levelly at

Magnus Johnson, almost with pride. "My husband said that no man alive, no man alive—" Suddenly, in full view of the court, she fainted.

We adjourned.

That night I slept like a baby. Until six in the morning. The telephone rang. It was Cornelia.

"You shouldn't have called," I snapped. "You can't tell who is listening. Can't you forget me until this is all over? Can't you put me out of your mind?"

"No," she said, and her voice was as dull as dishwater. "I'm afraid when I go back on the witness stand this morning, that somehow he'll make me admit someone else was with me all that night."

"Cornelia," I pleaded, "there's no sense in dragging me into this. Look, darling," I coaxed, "we've meant so much to each other. Don't spoil it. Please, please don't spoil it. After Magnus is acquitted, you'll have your divorce. Everything will be fine. Everything."

"I don't want a divorce. I can't turn my back on Magnus. Not after what he's done. I can't."

"Then don't dammit! Don't. Only get off this telephone before somebody comes after both of us!"

I slammed down the receiver.

I leaned against the wall and tried to think. But there was nothing I could do. Nothing but hope. . . .

I was still hoping when Cornelia was called back to the stand to complete her testimony. She was bright and fresh and she looked young and pretty again. I saw Magnus Johnson nodding his head softly, as though bursting with pride that she was his. And Cornelia kept looking at him.

The judge said, "Continue, Mrs. Johnson."

"I was awake at five in the morning when the *Alaska Star* blew for the landing. I waited until I heard footsteps coming up the sidewalk. I ran out the back door and away from the house. I heard a shot."

"What time was that?"

I was shaking. I leaned forward to listen.

She opened her mouth and no words came. The court reporter looked up impatiently. She tried again:

"At twenty minutes before six o'clock."

There was a gasp and an excited buzzing throughout the courtroom. I felt a streak of perspiration down my back.

"Mrs. Johnson, let me call to your attention previous testi-

mony by another witness that your husband was at work until six o'clock. Let me ask you again, bearing in mind that you are under oath—what time was it when you heard that shot?"

"At twenty minutes to six. I'm sure. I looked at my watch."

The defense attorney looked up, startled. He began to walk over to the District Attorney, and both of them were waved toward the bench by Judge Baar. Unconsciously I rose to my feet. The juror beside me pulled at my coattail.

"And I wanted to say," Cornelia cut into the hub-bub," I wanted to say—"

The judge lifted his hand.

There was a deep silence—until Cornelia's voice was heard:

"I wanted to say that the man my husband shot was already dead." She turned about in her chair, and looked straight at me. "I have not been a good wife," she said. "There was someone else in my home that morning. . . ."

The old jail is being torn down. Hammering and thudding, and the screech of nails being pulled out of timbers. The carpenters saved some of the biggest timbers and are using them to build a gallows in the courtyard.

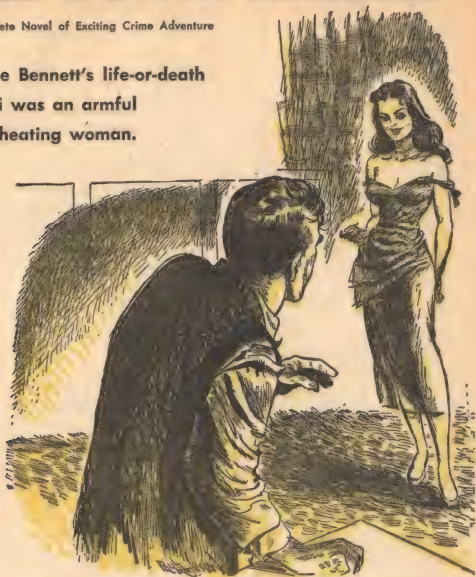
The first man hanged in the First Judicial Division, Territory of Alaska.

Me.

LIE DOWN, KILLER

Complete Novel of Exciting Crime Adventure

Steve Bennett's life-or-death
alibi was an armful
of cheating woman.



by RICHARD S. PRATHER

STEVE BENNETT frowned, wondering what was troubling Margo.

He shook his head, stretched his long body and leaned back against the car cushions. Night wind whipped in an open window and tangled his wavy dark

Reprint of the LION novel, "Lie Down, Killer." Copyright 1952 by Richard S. Prather.

hair as he glanced at the girl driving.

"Margo," he said quietly, "you're all wound up. Relax."

The girl was beautiful with a kind of obvious, showgirl beauty. She turned and looked at Steve Bennett from wide-set dark eyes, then fixed her gaze on the road ahead of them where bright headlights cut through the darkness.

"I am relaxed, darling," she said in a deep, pleasant voice. A trained voice. "Don't imagine things, now."

Steve looked at her long fingers tight around the steering wheel, at the white knuckles. He was still frowning. He stretched again and stifled a yawn. "O.K., Margo. Not awake yet. Never forgive you for not making coffee." He rubbed a hand along the black stubble starting to sprout from his jutting chin. "I should have shaved, at least."

"I told you there wasn't time. It's getting light already." Her voice was strained.

He glanced out the window. A half mile to their right the tallest buildings of Metro City were just starting to become faint silhouettes against the brightening sky. In another few minutes the sun would be visible.

Steve said, "Tell me more of this jealous Romeo."

"Oh, that," she said easily. "There's nothing to tell."

"What do you mean, 'Oh, that?'" he asked. "What the dickens are you scared of then?"

Her voice was sharp-edged and crisp. "I'm not scared of anything. Now will you shut up?"

Steve's jaw muscles bulged, but he sat quietly for a few moments. Then he said conversationally, "What now, Margo?"

She jerked her eyes from the road and stared at him, her eyes wide. Then she relaxed. "Sorry," she said. "I was thinking. I—shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

"Thinking about what?"

"You and me, Steve. Fun we used to have. Seems like a million years ago, two different people."

He started to answer, then looked again at her hands tight on the steering wheel. He asked casually, "What's eating you, Margo? You're jumpy as the dickens."

"Don't be silly, Steve."

"I'm not. You act afraid of something."

She laughed softly. "What in the world would I be afraid of? You're imagining things."

"Maybe. Could be this guy, whoever he is. Could be—"

She turned and glared at him, red lips pressed tight. "Lay off, Junior. I told you you were imagining things. Now leave it there."

Steve Bennett sighed. "O.K., O.K. Don't bust into pieces."

They drove silently for another block, then Margo pulled over to the side of the road and parked parallel to the curb between two street lamps.

Steve asked, "End of the line?"

"I don't think I'd better drive you farther. Someone might see us."

Steve frowned and said, "So they see us. I don't like this pussy-footing around, Margo. Will I see you tonight?"

"If you like."

"I like. About eight?"

"Any time. Eight's all right."

Steve put his left arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. She lifted her face, full lips parted.

He said softly, "You're wonderful, Margo. I . . . I missed you for a long time."

She said, "Steve," once in a strangled voice, then slid her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. She held him tightly for a moment, then released him

and said, "You'd better go; it's starting to get light."

He glanced over his shoulder at the glowing sky, then turned back to face her. He put one hand on each of her shoulders and spoke slowly.

"Margo, I know something must be bothering you. Maybe I can help—" She shrugged his hands violently off her shoulders and snapped, "Drop it! How many times do I have to tell you there's nothing! Now beat it."

Without another word, Steve Bennett opened the car door and stepped outside. Moving with easy grace, lithe and long-limbed, he shut the car door, mumbled, "See you," and started walking up the street into Metro City.

He'd gone only a few steps when the girl leaned out the car window and called, "Steve."

He stopped and turned to face her. "Yes?"

She stared at him for long seconds then shook her head. "Nothing," she said wearily. "Never mind, darling. Call me tonight."

He nodded, turned and walked away with a puzzled frown. In twenty-eight years he'd never learned to understand women. No reason he should suddenly start understanding them now.

He shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the lighted cafe on the corner ahead of him.

At the cafe he paused under the neon sign, *Dan's Hamburger Hut*, then pushed open the door and went in. At his left was a long, gleaming counter; on the right were half a dozen booths, all empty. There was only one other customer, a man at the far end of the counter.

Steve sat down on a stool at the counter and studied a menu as a short, thin man came up to stand in front of him.

The little man wiped the already clean counter with a white rag. "Morning," he said pleasantly. "Eat a lot, will ya? I need the business."

Steve grinned. "You must be Dan."

"Right. My place. But the overhead's terrific. How about a steak? It's a steal at two bucks."

Steve Bennett laughed. "O.K. But it'd better be good. And coffee now, please. Black."

Steve was sipping the hot coffee when he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned on the stool and found himself staring at the mischievously smiling face of the girl behind him.

She pursed her bright red lips and said sweetly, "Hello again,

you big louse. Are you just getting up or just going to bed?"

Steve found his face getting red against his will. He stood up and stammered, "Uh . . . just having some breakfast. Hello, Chris."

She looked at him, shaking her head, but said nothing as Steve got to his feet. Then she asked, "What in the world happened to your face?"

"My face?" Steve was puzzled for a moment, then he remembered, and he went beet-red. He remembered, in little disconnected scenes in his mind, Margo last night, the savagery of her words and movements, her fingernails digging into his shoulders—and then the sudden raking pain of her nails scraping across his cheek, leaving four angry red furrows deep in the skin.

He swallowed, and to cover his embarrassment and confusion pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed futilely at the now dry scratches.

"You're blushing!" Chris squealed. She still smiled, but the corners of her mouth twitched a little and tugged downward.

Then Steve noticed that she was no longer looking at his face, but at the handkerchief in his hand. He looked at it, saw the vivid red smear of Margo's lip-

stick that he'd wiped from his mouth, and underneath it the darker stain of blood from the scratches on his cheek. The implication was obvious.

Steve hastily stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket and said awkwardly, "Guess I'm sort of a mess. Have a stool. I'll buy breakfast."

"You'd better. Make up for that dinner I missed last night."

Steve winced, then sat down as she scooted onto a stool. Her low-heeled shoes barely scraped the floor.

After a quick consultation with Chris, Steve overcame her plea for something "light" and told Dan to put on another steak. Dan beamed.

Steve asked, trying to make conversation, "How come you're here at this hour, Chris?"

"I'm going down to the paper a little early," she said. "This is the only place close by that's open this time of morning. Be a couple hours till the other places open up. I live just around the corner on Blaine Street, you know." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye as she finished speaking.

He swallowed and summoned a small grin. "That's right; I know. I . . . look, Chris . . ."

"Oh, shut up," she said kindly. "You don't have to explain anything to me."

He asked, "How'd Cotton make out last night?"

"Don't you know?"

"Don't I know what?"

"Just, don't you know? I mean, haven't you seen him since you left the club last night? I . . . left right after you did."

Steve was embarrassed again.

Dan hustled up bearing wide plates burdened with two-inch steaks, fat green peas, and hash brown potatoes.

"There ya are," said Dan. "Best steaks in town. A steal."

Chris said, "Only ones in town at this hour. Steaks, golly. For breakfast." She glanced at Steve. "Do you always gorge yourself in the morning?"

He grinned. "Usually."

"I don't know." She frowned at the piled plate before her. "It's an awful lot."

"Eat it. Put some meat on your bones."

She raised her eyebrows and said frigidly, "Thank you, Mr. Bennett. I'm quite content with the meat already on my bones."

Steve grinned. "Don't blame you."

It was then they first heard the faint scream of the siren, rising

and falling, getting louder as they listened. In a few moments the sound was only a few blocks away, the wail rising again to its eerie peak.

CHRIS looked up at Steve. "Always gives me goose bumps," she said. "Makes me think of bloodhounds and men running through swamps."

Steve nodded, listening. "Sounds like they're coming right by here."

The sound of the siren was loud in their ears now, fallen from the high whine to its lowest register, muttering in a gritty bass. A black-and-white police radio car slid to a stop in front of the open door of the cafe.

"It's right out front." Steve grabbed Chris by the arm and hauled her up off the stool. "Let's take a look."

Together they hurried toward the front of the cafe as the near door of the police car opened and a tall, burly officer in uniform stepped to the sidewalk. The driver opened the door on his side and walked around in front of the car. Both men started toward the cafe just as Chris and Steve reached the sidewalk.

The burly officer took two long

steps toward Steve and grabbed him by the arm. "Just take it easy. You're not going anywhere."

Steve stared at him, surprised. "Who the hell said I was?"

Steve jerked his arm but the officer's grip remained firm. The cop's lips split in a tight grin.

Steve found his anger starting to grow. He said slowly, "Look, my good officer of the law, take your damn hand off my arm. What's coming off here?"

The other officer had stepped up close and now faced Steve. He looked at Steve from pale blue eyes under almost vanished eyebrows, his nearly colorless lips twisted into a sneer. He was as tall as the officer holding Steve, but much thinner. He had the veined nose and watery eyes of the heavy drinker. He licked his lips and chuckled.

"What's coming off, he wants to know."

The other officer said to Steve, "You're Bennett? Steve Bennett?"

"That's right. So?"

"You'd better come with Matt and me, Mr. Bennett."

"Come with—you mean you came down here with your sirens wide open just to get me?"

The burly cop nodded. "Better come along quietly, Mr. Bennett."

"Come along quietly!" Steve

exploded. "Come along *quietly!* Will you please explain—"

"Please explain," the thin Matt butted in. "Listen to him, Joe."

Steve turned back to the policeman called Joe. His face was heavier and more pleasant than the



other's even though it was grim and unsmiling now. But it was a face that seemed more sober and understanding than the other one. Steve talked to the heavier officer.

"Will you tell this comedian to calm down?" he asked. "I'll be glad to explain anything you're curious about."

Joe asked softly, "Where did you spend the night, Mr. Bennett?"

Steve felt his anger softening, the vague fear crystallizing till he could feel it like something solid in his stomach.

"I was . . ." Steve's voice trailed off as he remembered Chris and glanced at her. She

was staring at him with her lips parted, her eyes wide with surprise.

Joe, noticing his hesitation, said, "We checked your hotel. We know you weren't there. We just want to know where you *did* spend the night."

"Not that it's any of your damned business, but I was with a friend," Steve said. "I'll be—" He broke off, jerked his head and yelled, "Damn it! Quit pawing me!"

Matt had quickly run his hands under Steve's arms and across his legs and stomach. Joe still held Steve's arm tightly. Matt stepped back. "He's clean," he said.

Steve clenched his teeth and his jaw jutted forward. "You loons must think I'm somebody else. Am I under arrest or have you just got a gestapo complex?"

Matt chimed in nasally, "You don't mind if I take a look at your wallet? You sure you don't mind?"

"My wallet? What for?"

"Fun," Matt said. "For fun. Be nice."

Joe let go of his left arm and Steve pulled his wallet from his pants pocket and tossed it to Matt. "Don't lose anything in it," he said grimly. "I'll want it back. *With the money.*"

Matt opened the wallet and looked inside, then took out a thin sheaf of bills. He looked at them and whistled softly through his teeth. "Hundreds," he said. "C-notes. Well, well. Imagine."

He spread them and counted them quickly, then looked at the other officer. "Eleven," he said. "That's good. That's very, very good." He riffled through the bills, looking closely at them, then took a paper from his pocket and studied it a moment. He glanced at Joe and nodded slightly. "Right on the button," he said to him. "Exactly on the button."

He put the bills back into Steve's wallet and shoved the wallet into his own pocket. "Where'd you get this money?"

"I won it."

"He won it, ne says. Where was it you won it?"

The grating voice and manner of the policeman was rasping Steve's self-control. He snapped, "You can't be as stupid as you look. Where the hell you think I won it? At the *Cockatoo*. Tell me you never heard of it. You didn't know they gambled. Is that it?"

Matt didn't answer. He looked at Steve for several seconds, then

said, "What's wrong with your face? You fell down, huh?"

"Sure, I fell down."

"Clumsy, huh? You couldn't have got scratched in some kind of fight, could you?" Matt stared at Steve, still grinning.

Steve felt Chris' hand on his arm. "What's the matter? Can I help?"

He looked down at her and shook his head wearily. "I don't know, Chris. I honestly don't know."

The officers grasped him easily by both arms and steered him toward the prowler car.

Joe said, "Come along, Mr. Bennett. Won't do to stand here any longer." He sounded tired.

Steve, still uncomprehending and unbelieving, allowed himself to be guided to the radio car. He got in the back seat and Joe, the heavy-set cop, slid in beside him. Matt shut the doors and climbed into the front seat under the wheel.

Bewildered, Steve asked, "What's it all about? What is it, a joke or something?"

Matt twisted his thin neck around and looked at Steve. He wasn't grinning and his voice was thin and vicious. "That's what it is," he said. "A joke. A nice, big joke on you, killer."

THE QUIET preparations for murder had begun two days before on a Monday afternoon by handsome Oscar Gross in his private office above the *Cockatoo* club in Metro City. The following evening, Tuesday, Steve Bennett, unaware that murder plans were already in operation, was on his way to have dinner with his business partner and best friend, Cotton Clay. Steve and Cotton had a successful sporting-goods store in Laguna Beach.

At six o'clock Steve Bennett, showered, shaved, and dressed in a new, light-weight tropic suit, climbed the stairs to Cotton's apartment in the Villa Apartments on Coast Boulevard. He knocked and Cotton let him in.

"Hi, bum," Cotton said. "Aren't you pretty?"

"Even shined my shoes," Steve said, sinking into an easy chair. "What's on the menu?"

Cotton flopped like a lanky scarecrow onto the bed in the combination living-room and bedroom. He was over six feet tall, but his one-hundred and sixty pounds barely managed to cover all his bones. His manner was quick, impatient, and he had the nervous habit of tossing his head in a quick little jerk that whipped

the unruly strands of yellowish hair out of his black, snapping eyes. He was thirty-three, five years older than Steve, but for twenty-two of those years they'd been close friends. Even with the disparity between their ages, much greater when they were kids, a friendship had sprung up between them and they'd grown closer, rather than farther apart as they grew older. They went on double-dates together, talked together, swam, and ran on Laguna's hot sands together, Steve content to enjoy life as it was, Cotton violent and earnest, out to change the world.

He still meant to change it, at least a little of it, if he could.

Cotton said, "Gonna hit Metro City tonight, chum. Gonna see a man."

"Campaign fodder. Right?"

"Right. It's more than that—you know what I mean, Steve."

Steve did know what Cotton meant. Cotton was running for Congressman from the twenty-second district and he'd taken his party's primary and almost made a clean sweep under the California system of cross-filing, by running a close second to Ownie Sharon on the opposing party's ballot. The November finals would be between Sharon

and Jim "Cotton" Clay—and from here it looked like Cotton in a walk. Cotton's program was simple but powerful: he offered honest, economical government in place of the present graft-ridden, mobster-dominated local regime. Cotton would get passionate and rhetorical in long hours of conversation with Steve, and Steve would laugh and shake his head while Cotton pointed at him and bellowed, "Can you deny it? You damn fool, you. What the hell *do* you believe in?"

And then Steve would laugh some more and say, "What do you care? You just like to hear yourself talk. Don't worry, stupid. I'll vote for you." And Cotton would be off again.

But he'd gone beyond the merely political aspects that he and Steve discussed, to the leveling of bald charges against powerful and prominent men—Carleton Atkin, a California Senator; Oscar Gross, wealthy owner of the *Cockatoo* and consort of political bigwigs; Thomas Spinet, Superior Court judge; Harry "The Axe" Magnani, cultured gentleman of mysterious past and no present visible means of support—and others. He claimed they were parasites on a reasonably decent society and should be jailed or

worse. So far Cotton hadn't been hauled into court, but Steve insisted the day wasn't far off.

Steve lit a cigarette and tossed the pack to Cotton. "Who is it tonight," he asked. "And where we going in Metro City?"

"The *Cockatoo*. And that's who, too." Cotton laughed easily, as a man will who laughs often. "That's who, too. I sound like an owl. I mean the *Cockatoo's* boss. Oscas Gross, the stinking punk."

Steve frowned. "You mean you're going to see Gross after all the dirt you been tossing at him?"

"No, not *see* him. It's about him. An informer." He threw one arm up over his head dramatically, fingers spread wide. "Or stool pigeon, if you will. Some more dirt on Gross, and I'll be plenty glad to get it. Scum like Gross ought to rot in dungeons." He paused. "That boy's not just a behind-the-scenes politician, Steve; he's got blood on his hands. I get just a little more on him, and maybe he'll rot in one of those dungeons. Maybe I get it tonight."

Steve draped his legs over the arm of the chair. "You and your informers," he said dolefully.

"Where the hell you think I get my info? Where you think cops get their dope?"

"O.K. Relax. Who's tonight's informer?"

Cotton shook his head quickly back and forth. "New one. I don't know him, and he didn't give a name, but I'll know him by his voice. Such a high, twangy voice I never heard before. Sounded like he was playing a banjo with his larynx." He jumped up from the couch, lanky and cadaverous. "Come on, bum. I meet the guy at the *Cockatoo* bar—he'll know me. We'll have dinner there. Git on your hoss."

THE *Cockatoo* is the biggest, brightest night spot in Metro City, population sixty thousand. It's in the heart of town, a glittering temple on Main Street, dedicated to many of the minor vices and, possibly, some of the major ones.

You walk under a striped awning along a narrow sidewalk fringed with green shrubs and enter between massive double doors. Over your head as you approach and go in, the ten-foot-high neon cockatoo from which the place gets its name flashes on and off as the bird does a mechanical dance limited to successively illuminated patterns of neon tubing. It's a dance that

seems to be merely a bird doing a spasmodic jig when you first see the sign, but after three or four cocktails it becomes almost indecently suggestive. You wonder why the sign is allowed to remain above the club, ten feet high and garish and bawdy; then you remember there wasn't anything wrong with it when you first saw the thing. Maybe it just looks different on the way out.

Steve drove his Chrysler over from Laguna Beach and parked in the *Cockatoo's* parking lot. He and Cotton got out and Steve glanced at the sign flashing on and off over the entrance. "Some bird," he said and they walked under the striped awning and inside the club.

"It's only seven," Cotton said. "What say we beer up at the bar?"

Steve nodded and they perched on stools and ordered their drinks from a haughty but highly efficient bartender. The bar was adjacent to the main dining room and dance floor of the club, separated from it by a thin wall, but open at both ends so the music of the alternating swing and rumba bands could reach the drinkers. Three white-coated bartenders stood behind the long bar which curved at each end to

meet the wall. On the wall was a wide mirror, extending the full length of the bar and reflecting the images of the ten or fifteen drinkers already seated on the stools.

Steve sipped his beer and asked, "You don't know who the guy is you see tonight?"

"Nope. Got a phone call this afternoon. Guy said it'd be worth my time to come over. He'll know us."

"Maybe I shouldn't have come along. Might scare him off."

Cotton gave his head a quick jerk and flipped yellow hair out of his eyes. "The hell, bum. We always follow these things up together. Besides, I asked the guy if I had to come alone. He said it made no difference so I told him I'd bring you along."

"Why didn't he chase down to Laguna?"

"Dunno. Maybe he couldn't make it. I didn't ask; I don't like to press these guys too hard. It's a seller's market."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, drinking, with no need for conversation between them. Finally Cotton finished his beer and ordered two more. Suddenly he turned to Steve.

"Steve, old bum," he said in his explosive chatter, "I have just

spied a slick chick drinking alone at the end of the bar."

"So?"

"So the best of it is, I know her. The worst of it is, she's got a brain. Ace fem reporter on the *Metro Cryer*. I'll bring you two together and watch romance blossom." He paused and added more quietly, "Or are all your women still Freudian substitutes for one Maggie Whitney?"

Steve winced involuntarily, remembering the times when he and Maggie had, with the innocence and lack of personal curiosity of the very young, gone swimming in the nude on deserted stretches of beach. The carefree and childish companionship of years finally culminating in a sudden and explosive awareness of each other. He remembered the strange moment when they'd looked at each other for the first time with eyes that weren't the eyes of children.

He sighed, remembering how quickly she had been transformed from a laughing tomboy to a stranger, to a creature different from him, to a woman who could be loved. She had been the first and, though there'd been a war since then and other women, Maggie Whitney was still first for Steve.

He poured beer into his glass too rapidly and the foam oozed over the rim of the glass and spread on the wooden bar. He said, "Get lost, Cotton. I'm a big boy now. That was more than seven years ago."

The bartender mopped up the spilled beer and polished the bar's surface with swift, unobtrusive swipes of a white bar towel.

Steve said, "Well, where's this brainy paragon?"

Cotton grinned and slid off his stool. "Coming right up, chum."

Steve watched Cotton as he walked to the end of the bar. He spoke to a woman seated at the end of the bar where it curved to meet the wall. Steve couldn't see the woman clearly, but he could hear her laugh suddenly at something Cotton said. It was a nice laugh, jolly, a having-fun laugh. Steve tried to imagine what she looked like, but failed. People weren't ever just like you imagined them anyway.

Then they were beside him and Steve was standing up saying, "How do you do, Miss Lawton. Cotton warned me you had a brain, but he didn't warn me about the rest of you." It was obviously a compliment, though awkward.

"You must be nervous," she

said. "Putting me on the defensive like that. And it's Christine, but all my lovers call me Chris."

Steve said, "Well then, I'll call you Chr—" and stopped lamely in the middle of the sentence. He swallowed, "I mean—" he amended, and stopped again.

She laughed delightedly. "Don't be embarrassed," she said. "I don't *really* have any lovers. You call me Chris anyway, Mr. Bennett."

"Steve."

Cotton interposed. "Come, my glassy-eyed friend. I've taken the liberty of inviting Chris to have dinner with us. She insists on lobster."

"Lobster tails," she corrected him. "I like steak better, but you're paying. Lobster tails cost six dollars."

Steve, trying to make up for his near conversational blunder, said hesitantly, "And you shall have all the—all the lobster you want." He wondered what the devil was the matter with his tongue.

He looked at Chris. What there was of her was pleasant to look upon, but there wasn't really much of her. Everything was there, though. Decidedly so. She was wearing a black two-piece suit of something like taffeta.

The jacket was buttoned once between her high breasts, over a white blouse, then swooped to the sides and wound up in some kind of fishtail affair in back. She'd probably made a lot of men stutter, Steve defended himself.

She was still laughing at him, amused rather than malicious. "Oh, come on, you," she said brightly. "We can't eat at the bar."

They found a table in the rapidly filling dining room and ordered dinner. Chris chattered away like an empty-headed magpie as they downed the soup and tossed green salad. Then she turned to Steve. "Do you think women should drink alone at bars?"

He said, "Why, no . . . I mean, yes. Certainly, I mean. Men do."

"Oh? No double standard?"

"I . . . guess not. I never thought much about it."

"Well, *think* about it," she demanded.

Steve frowned at her. "I've got to get used to you, Chris." He decided suddenly, "Cotton and I have a little business at nine. What say we have a midnight supper afterward and pursue my education farther? I'll buy you the thickest steak we can find."

She pursed her lips and pretended to think about his suggestion. "Are you a wolf?"

"A veritable lamb."

"All right." And it was settled.

The meal proceeded merrily, spiked with Chris' chatter and sudden changes of subject. Over their lobsters Steve learned Chris' address which he wrote down in a thick notebook he found in an inside coat pocket. The book was filled with notes to order Johnson's skis or Phillson's catcher's mitts, but he pretended to do much searching for the "C's," then the "Ch's," while Chris drummed on the table and queried, "A veritable lamb?" But they both knew he was kidding.

Steve glanced across the table at Cotton and paused with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth. On Cotton's homely face was an expression of surprise mingled with distaste and what appeared to be anger. He was looking over Steve's shoulder at someone or something behind him. At the same moment a sweet, half-remembered scent tickled Steve's nostrils.

He glanced over his shoulder trying to recall where he'd known that perfume before.

Then he saw her.

She was tall, full-breasted and

wide-hipped, dressed in a clinging dove-gray gown that flowed over her skin and plunged at the neckline. Black hair parted in the middle was swept back close to her head and allowed to fall loosely in back, a little like two lustrous black wings.

He knew her at once. She'd changed; she'd changed a lot, but Steve couldn't forget that sensuous face or the arrogant smile.

He stood up suddenly, his chair tipping and falling with a small clatter to the floor. He stared at her and said in amazement:

"Maggie!"

3

A FEW people turned their heads and stared briefly, then paid no more attention to them. Maggie Whitney ran the tip of her red tongue over the lush curve of her lower lip.

She stepped toward Steve, both hands extended, and gripped his brown hands in her soft, white ones.

"Steve, *darling!*" she whispered intimately. "It's so *good!* So *good* to see you again." She squeezed his hands gently in hers and smiled warmly at him.

Steve's face felt wooden, but he managed to get through the introductions mechanically and in

a few moments Maggie was seated at the table with them, clinging possessively to the fingers of Steve's right hand. Steve's throat was dry and tight and his brain whirled with the sudden surprise of seeing her again.

He said automatically, "This is a surprise, Maggie. I had no idea . . . I thought you were in 'Frisco or somewhere up North."

"I was, darling." With the "darling" she gave his fingers a sudden squeeze and he felt something like sickness in his stomach.

She went on, "I was singing in a night club in San Francisco. It's a wonderful town, San Francisco. So alive, so real." She turned to Chris as if she'd just noticed there was another woman present.

"Don't you think it has character?" she asked.

Chris said dryly, "Devastating, darling. I think it's *too*."

Maggie's smile flickered and almost went out, but she turned again to Steve, her bright lips framing perfect white teeth. "It's not Maggie any more, Steve. It's Margo. Margo Whitney. After all, my name *is* Margaret, and Margo is so much nicer for a singer, I'll be singing here starting next Monday. You must come and see me. I'd like that."

"I'd like it too. I will." Steve was all mixed up, trying to reconcile this glittering, daringly gowned woman who was Margo, with the Maggie Whitney he'd kept locked in his brain. From the corner of his eye he could see Chris quietly watching them.

He turned to her. "You must have guessed," he said. "We're old friends. I've known Maggie—Margo—a long time."

"I puzzled it out," Chris said without sarcasm.

Margo monopolized the conversation for the next few minutes, then she said, "Come on, everybody. Let's go upstairs where it's livelier."

"What's upstairs?" Steve asked.

"Oh, darling. Don't you know? Why, I just got here yesterday, and already I know my way around."

Chris coughed gently and patted her lips with a napkin.

Margo went on, unruffled, "I've already looked the place over. It might cost you a little money, but you might also win some." She widened her eyes archly.

"Like that," Steve said.

"*Just* like that."

Steve glanced at Cotton who nodded and said, "Sounds like fun. Might be interesting." He grinned at Steve.

They all went to an elevator placed conveniently at the end of a hallway backstage. Margo pressed a black button in a panel set into the elevator wall and they slowly rumbled up one flight. They stepped out into another hallway leading to their left, ending at a closed door. Directly ahead of them, across the hall, was a velvet-draped archway, and Margo led them through it into a plushly carpeted and decorated room even more magnificent than the dining room downstairs and of approximately the same size.

Steve estimated that there were almost fifty people there and glancing at his watch he noticed it was a few minutes before eight P.M. Two roulette tables in the middle of the room, dice tables, poker, blackjack—the entire array of easy-money mirages from chuck-a-luck to one-armed bandits.

Flush with the wall next to the elevator was a long line of clanking slot machines that reminded Steve of Las Vegas; the opposite wall sported a small bar on the left and couches and overstuffed chairs at the right.

Margo clung to Steve's arm and Chris had gravitated, almost automatically it seemed, to Cotton.

She looked absurdly tiny next to Cotton's gangling frame.

Cotton whistled softly through his teeth. "How do you like that? I knew this was around here someplace, but I didn't know it was this big a deal." He turned and grinned at Steve. "Would you say that this indicated the strictest of law enforcement in Metro City?"

Steve shook his head. "Hardly. Looks like a mint. Aren't you happy?"

"Yep. I—the hell. I *was* happy. Looks like we might be favored."

"Favored? How?"

"The boss. Number one on my list—you know what list I mean. Can't say in mixed company. Looks like we're about to be favored with the presence of Oscar Gross, the man himself."

Steve followed Cotton's gaze and saw a very tall, broad-shouldered man walking deliberately across the room toward them. People melted out of his way deferentially and some nodded and spoke to him. He answered none of them and came forward in a straight line as if he knew beforehand that nobody would block his path. He was confident and assured in a well-made dinner jacket, and a cordial smile was on his handsome face.

He stopped before them.

"Well, well," he rumbled softly. "This is a real surprise. And a pleasure, Mr. Clay. I was wondering when you'd drop in." He extended a manicured hand.

Cotton accepted it briefly and said, "It was an accident. Miss Whitney—" he nodded toward Margo "—was kind enough to—"

"Fine, fine. How are you, my dear?" Gross smiled at Margo and said, "Margo is going to be singing here. Down below in the club."

Cotton introduced Chris and Steve, then said to Gross, "Nice spot you've got here. Must get a good play."

"It does. It does, indeed. Only you're in error, Mr. Clay. This isn't *my* place." He smiled pleasantly. "I relax here occasionally, but that's my only connection with the club."

Cotton laughed explosively. "Sure!"

Watching them and listening to the conversation, Steve felt a tension and electric undercurrent between the two men even though the conversation appeared casual and ordinary. There was something too assured, too oily about Gross for Steve's taste and he didn't like the man's bland, patronizing manner.

Steve said, "I'm almost a beginner at this sort of thing, Mr. Gross. Maybe I'll make a fortune."

"Perhaps. Beginner's luck might help you do just that."

Cotton broke in, "Can you actually win on these tables, Gross?"

Gross laughed. "Of course. Straight percentage. That's all the house ever needs." He waved long fingers in the air. "Well, I'll leave you to the devil's games. Good luck to you all." He turned to Cotton. "You know, Mr. Clay," he said abruptly, "you've said some rather unkind things about me lately. That's not very nice."

Cotton looked levelly at Gross. "That's true," he said slowly. "I'll probably say more."

"Well, that's politics, I suppose," Gross answered genially. "No hard feelings—while you're here your drinks are all on the house." He nodded, stepped around them and started to walk out the velvet-draped entrance.

Cotton said, "Thanks. You must have pull with the boss, Gross."

Gross kept walking, but turned his head and spoke over his shoulder just before he went out of the casino. "I do, Mr. Clay," he said pleasantly. "Indeed I do."

"Brrl!" Chris said as he disappeared through the archway. "He's certainly a good-looking guy, but the man gives me the creeps."

"He gives a lot of people the creeps," Cotton said. "Excuse us a minute, will you, ladies?" He jerked his head at Steve and walked through the archway. Steve followed. In the hallway, Cotton pointed toward the door Steve had noticed at the end of the hall. Steve looked and saw Gross just going through, shutting the door behind him. Steve caught a brief glimpse of the inside of the room, part of a big brown desk and an easy chair near it, as the door closed and Cotton said, "Just wanted to show you, Steve. The punk says he doesn't have any connection with the club—he just lives here, that's all. Two rooms in there, office and bedroom."

Steve said, "You must have gathered a lot of dope on the guy."

Cotton grinned. "I've got about enough. Maybe tonight I get enough to hang him. I also know he hasn't got a safe in his office; just a big, strong desk. And I'll bet he's got a pile of records in there. I doubt he's like me—most of his dope in his head—and I'll

bet he's got plenty in black and white. Maybe nothing too incriminating, maybe in code even, but that boy's got his bloody fingers in so many pies he's got to keep track somehow. I think it's in there, bum, and I'd give a year off my life to get in there, alone, for an hour."

"That a poor trade, Cotton. Unwind."

Cotton grinned again. "Well, perhaps that is a slight exaggeration. Better get back; the gals will be flipping."

They returned to the casino and Margo grabbed Steve's arm. "Come on; let's get rich." She waved to Cotton and Chris. "Try your luck. I'll show Steve around. Cute, isn't it?"

THEN she was leading him by the hand from one table to another. They put a few dollars into slot machines and lost twenty at the dice tables. Steve found that he was enjoying himself, enjoying the hum of conversation, the click of the ball in the roulette wheel and the dice rattling before they were thrown. The atmosphere of strain and tense expectancy was contagious and pulse-quickenning. Steve and

Margo had a highball and chatted idly while Steve watched the fleeting expressions on the faces of the gamblers.

Margo began to seem more like the girl Steve had known before and he felt his chest filling with a tight excitement that interfered with his breathing. He tried to analyze his emotions about her, discover what he really felt for Margo, but he only knew that he wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her for making him want her for so long, so uselessly.

And now she was close beside him again. The casual, or seemingly casual caress of her fingers across his hand or cheek sent ripples of sensation through his entire body. The whiteness of her throat and the revealed curve at the neckline of her gown dried the moisture in his mouth and slurred his speech.

They drank another highball and carried a third to the roulette table. In a matter of minutes, playing carelessly, Steve was two hundred dollars ahead. He grinned at Margo. "I should have tried this before."

"Of course you should have, darling. You've been missing things."

He looked steadily at her and

said, "I have, Margo. I've been missing a lot."

She pushed her lips lightly forward and kissed the air at her lips, her gaze resting on Steve's mouth. He felt a faint tingling suddenly, as if her hot breath had passed over his skin.

He said quickly, "Let's leave. Let's get out of here, Margo. I've got to talk to you, be alone with you for a while."

She laughed in her throat. "Not now, Steve. Don't ever quit while you're winning." Then she turned to the roulette layout again.

Steve shrugged and placed chips at random on the table. In a few minutes he counted his chips. There were eight red chips and fifteen white ones, a total of five hundred and fifty dollars. He cupped them in his hands and said, "Margo, I've had enough. Let's cash in. Let's spend some of it."

She glanced at the chips. "How much?"

"Five hundred and fifty."

"All right, Steve, but you're silly. Why, you're *hot*." Her eyes narrowed. "I've got a hunch. Red. Red for blood. Red for . . . my lips. Put it all on red. Then, win or lose, we'll leave. Then we'll leave, darling."

Steve hesitated momentarily and Margo's lip curled. "Afraid? Afraid to take a chance, Steve?"

Steve's jaw tensed, relaxed. He placed all the chips on red.

The croupier spun the wheel, flicked the little ball around in its groove. Steve didn't give a damn whether the color was red or black or violet. He was watching Margo, his forehead creased.

The ball clicked and fell into one of the thirty-eight slots. The bored voice of the croupier droned, "Number seven, red . . ." and Margo squeezed Steve's arm.

"I told you I had a hunch. Feel better now?"

"Sure. I feel fine."

Margo gathered up the chips, then jerked her head at Steve. "Come on, Lucky. This is your lucky night." She laughed in his face.

Margo dumped the chips in front of one of the three cashiers and stood aside for Steve to get his cash. A red-faced cashier with a long, drooping lower lip looked up from a book in which he'd been entering some figures. He put down his pen and glanced casually at Steve.

"Beating the house, huh?" he asked.

Steve started to answer, then paused, his brow furrowed. The

cashier's voice had been high and twangy; Steve remembered Cotton saying the man who had phoned him sounded like he was playing a banjo with his larynx, and the description fitted the cashier's voice perfectly. He started to mention the phone call, then decided against it.

Steve said casually, "Won a little. Not much for this place, I don't imagine."

The cashier counted out crisp, clean hundred-dollar bills that looked as if they'd just come from the bank. "Eleven hundred," he said. "Not bad at all." He smiled, his lower lip hanging grotesquely, "Even for this place."

Steve took the bills and offered six of them to Margo. "Here," he said, "you deserve half, at least."

Her face sobered. "No, Steve. That's your money; I had a lot of fun watching."

"There'd only have been half as much if it hadn't been for you." Steve turned to the cashier and said, "What do you think of a gal who doesn't want money? Think you can convince her for me?"

The cashier shook his head. "Don't mix me up in it."

Steve turned to Margo and extended the money still in his

hand. "Come on, take your cut without any argument."

She shook her head. "No. I . . . don't want your money, Steve. It would make me—" she paused and caressed his sleeve with her fingers—"feel funny about . . . everything."

Steve thrust the bills in his wallet and took Margo's arm, steering her toward the elevator, then he stopped and said, "I can't just leave, Margo. I'll have to tell them, tell Cotton I'm leaving."

Margo pouted and looked for a moment like the girl she'd been



years before. "I thought you were in a hurry," she protested.

"I am. I am, Margo. But I can't just walk out. Wait here—I'll be right back."

She stopped him. "No. I'll meet you in the parking lot. It's better that way—I'll explain when you get down. I'll be in a sky-blue Buick coupe in the lot."

She stepped into the elevator and Steve glanced around. He spied Cotton's unruly yellowish hair above the crowd at one of the dice tables, pushed through, and tapped him on the elbow.

Cotton's plain features split in a wide grin. "Where the hell you been? This is some place for a Congressional candidate, huh? We even won fifty bucks. The tables must be on the level."

"The guy with the banjo voice," Steve said. Cotton raised an eyebrow and Steve nodded toward the cashier's cage. "Over there. Red-faced cashier."

"You sure?"

"From your description of what he sounded like, it can't be anybody else."

Cotton frowned. "That's a little peculiar. Well, I'll give it a check. Thanks."

Steve saw Chris then, almost hidden up against the table.

"Hi," she said. "Where's the menace?"

Steve chewed on his lip. "Uh . . . I wanted to tell you." The words seemed hard to get out now. "I, well, thought I'd take off. That is, we were going for a ride."

Cotton looked at Steve. He said quietly, "The hook's still in, huh, bum?"

"Maybe," Steve answered. "I don't know for sure." He looked down at Chris. "About that supper . . ."

She smiled. "Don't fret your head, Steve. Some other time, maybe." She turned quickly away.

"Sure. Sure thing, Chris." Then to Cotton, "It's a little after eight-thirty now. You want me to stick around to see that guy with you?"

"What for? I don't need a bodyguard." Cotton grinned again. "You wouldn't be much good, anyway. Now, beat it, bum."

4

STEVE found Margo waiting for him in a new Buick Roadmaster with white sidewall tires. He climbed in.

"You must have been doing all right," he said. "Better than—better than a long time ago."

She started the car and pulled out of the lot, using an alley bisecting the block at the rear of the club. "Do we have to talk about then? That was such a long time ago, Steve."

"I know. I know better than you how long ago it was."

"No you don't, Steve. A lot of times I was sorry." She laughed lightly, "But I was a gal who

knew what she wanted. I was always too poor before; always grubbing for money. And now I'm it. I'm a singer with money in the bank, a new car, fine clothes. I've sung with some of the best bands in the country. I've arrived. Well, practically arrived—I'm getting there."

"I guess that's better than being married to the half-owner of a sporting goods store," Steve said with an attempt at lightness.

She turned down a darkened street and said seriously, "I really don't know. Maybe. Maybe not." Then quickly, "Don't be hurt, Steve. I just don't know for sure. Not now any more than way back when I left Laguna Beach for greener pastures. And that was such a long time ago; we're not the same two people we were then."

They drove slowly and in silence for a minute or two, then Margo laughed. "We're too serious. Let's have fun tonight."

"Right." Steve looked around. "Aren't there any lights in Metro City? Or are we just taking back alleys?"

"Back alleys. On purpose. Same reason I wanted you to meet me in the parking lot. Steve, I'll say this once, then let's not mention it again. I don't want anyone to

see us together—you with me. I'm—sort of engaged. Spoken for, you might say. I didn't know I'd ever see you again. When I saw you tonight I knew I'd have to talk to you, be with you a while. But it's better just you and me. Nobody else has to know."

Steve started to speak, but she reached across the car and laid a cool finger over his lips. "I just wanted to get it off my chest. Now let's forget it."

Steve said nothing. He sat thinking, remembering, during the rest of the drive.

Margo left him at the door of her small house on the outskirts of Metro City, walked across the room and switched on a table lamp beside a low couch opposite the door. She said, "Come on in. Here's home—for the time being anyway. Till the next stand somewhere. Get busy and mix us a drink, Mr. Bennett." She turned and looked at him, hands hanging down at her sides. More softly she said, "My lovely Mr. Bennett."

She turned and led the way to the kitchen and swung open the door of the refrigerator. Steve busied himself mixing two drinks and then carried them back into the front room. He sat down in a low-slung green chair; Margo

sat on the couch and tucked her long legs beneath her.

Steve said, "I'll have to learn to know you all over again, Margo. We're both more than seven years older."

"And seven years wiser," she said.

"Maybe. I might be just as big a fool about you as I was when we were kids."

"I've changed so little?"

"Not that exactly. It's that you've changed so much. You're not the same at all. There's part of Maggie left, but I remember an eighteen-year-old kid." He swallowed some of his drink and said, looking at her, "The kid's all gone; you're all woman . . . and more beautiful, even, than I remembered you."

"Steve." Margo unwound her legs slowly and got up. She walked across the room toward him with a lazy deliberation, the gray cloth of her gown sliding against her skin. The light near the couch was behind her and she appeared as a silhouette, wide hips swinging easily. She sat on the arm of his chair and rested one hand against his forehead, fingers caressing the line of his hair.

"Steve. It is good to see you again, be alone with you. Just

the two of us. I've been so many places and done so many things I'd almost forgotten." She was looking directly at him, her voice more caressing than the cool fingers on his brow.

"Funny how we ran into each other," he said.

"Isn't it?"

Steve tried to make his voice casual, but couldn't. He was too completely aware of her. His eyes rested on the fullness of her thigh where it rested on the arm of his chair, the gray cloth pulled tight over the skin. He felt the increased beat of his heart, pounding, labored.

Margo let her hand slip down over his face, brushing his lips, then toyed with a button of his shirt. She slipped the button free and pressed her palm against his bare chest, fingers curling, the long nails barely touching his skin.

She bent forward with her lips parted, glistening with moist light-shine, and kissed his mouth. Her lips moved softly, expertly on his own.

Steve shivered involuntarily as he put his hands against her back and pulled her tight against him. The warm, woman smell of her was in his nostrils and the taste of her lipstick grew on his lips.

He slid his cheek around against hers and whispered, "Margo, Margo, damn you . . ."

"Steve." Husky, hot, her breath curled past his ear and whispered across the fine hair on his neck.

Even while longing grew in him, Steve felt unbidden worry and perplexity darting in his brain. Somewhere, scuttling in the depths of his mind, something dark and ugly was swelling, jabbing at his consciousness. He tried to ignore it, forget thought and doubt completely and lose himself in Margo's demanding lips and fluid body. But it was still there, even as her mouth pressed deep against the hollow of his throat. He felt the heavy, heated pulse of blood frantic at her lips, as if his heart were pumping naked against her mouth.

Then she slid away from him and stood up. Softly she said, "I'll be a minute, darling. I'll be right back." She walked away from him and into another room on the right.

For a moment after Margo left the room, Steve sat quietly, breathing in long, shaking gasps. He felt as if he should run outside and breathe great lungfuls of the night air to cool his blood and slow his spinning brain. And without Margo close and heady

beside him, the worry crept again into his mind. Funny, he thought, that they should meet again after so many years. And it was almost as if they'd never been apart—except that Margo was riper, more desirable now.

He squinted, puzzled. It had been little more than an hour since they'd met again, but he was alone with her, in her house, drinking with her. Kissing her. Just like that.

Steve, still frowning, got up and crossed to the door of the room into which Margo had disappeared. The door stood a little ajar and he gave it a slight push and stopped at the entrance.

"Margo—" he called.

She was gowned now purely to excite a man. The negligee was artfully fashioned to conceal much of the bare flesh beneath, yet with each sinuous movement of the body, it revealed flashing glimpses of the beauty that was there.

Margo was just in the act of replacing a french phone back on its hook as Steve pushed open the door.

STEVE's thoughts took on more clarity and finally he put his

doubt into words in his mind. *It's too pat*, he thought. *Too easy, too—rehearsed.* The casual meeting; the tour of the *Cockatoo*; the surreptitious drive here; drinks, whispered words and demanding kisses. And now a stage prop, the clincher, the sandbag; one shimmering silver negligee upon Margo's beautiful body. Or was he imagining things, torturing himself by resisting the need that had grown for years inside him? Perhaps it was that he feared his going to her now would mean the end of a gawky kid's dream, the kid now grown into manhood and his dream become too warm flesh and too violent blood.

Steve looked at the phone and Margo's hand still resting upon it. "Who were you calling?"

She said easily, "Morrison's. For more refreshment—liquid refreshment. There isn't much liquor left and I thought we might want more. Later."

"Oh."

"They said they'd send a boy out as soon as they could."

"Fine."

Of course. He'd almost finished the bottle of bourbon when he'd made their two drinks. Calling for more was sensible enough. Not that he needed any more;

looking at Margo, Steve felt drunk with her image alone.

She got up and came slowly to him, touching him. Steve told himself he was foolish to let his head fill with silly, disturbing ideas. Vague fears, or even solid logic, were poor weapons against the beauty of a desirable woman. And useless when her remembered face and flesh were part of the design of years.

Margo ran her hands up Steve's arms and around his neck and pressed against him. She closed her eyes and let her head fall limply back. "Kiss me," she said huskily. "Kiss me, Steve."

He put his arms around her waist, pulled her tightly to him and with his heart pounding, bent his mouth to hers. He carried her into the room. He turned off the light.

Then, again, she was close against him, surprising him with her violence. He felt her fingernails clutching against his back, digging, hurting. He felt her fingers against his arm, his shoulder, and then she slid her hand to his cheek. Suddenly, in one swift, slashing movement, she ripped her nails across his cheek, tearing the flesh.

For a moment he said nothing, did nothing, the shock and pain

leaving his mind blank. Then he moved quickly away from her, one hand pressed to his cheek and feeling the warm stickiness there. He fumbled for his handkerchief. "What the devil was that for? What—" He stopped speaking and pressed the handkerchief to his cheek, then found the lamp and turned it on.

He looked at Margo. "What the hell, woman?"

She said softly, her voice tight, "I'm sorry, Steve. Believe me, I am. I couldn't help it, I just didn't think. I *am* sorry, Steve. I won't—it won't happen again. Please, Steve."

He shook his head. He stared at his stained handkerchief a moment before putting it back against his cheek. He sat without speaking, looking at Margo.

Her eyes were narrowed. She moved closer to him and said softly, "I said I was sorry, Steve. I don't know what made me do that. Except, you—I couldn't help it, darling. Don't be angry. Please, Steve." She moved closer to him, speaking softly, then touching him gently, lightly. "Please, Steve," she whispered again.

And, finally, he reached for her, put his arms around her, and pulled her to him.

Later, Steve asked, "Why so still and quiet, Margo?"

"Thinking. Remembering the way we were when we were kids."

He smiled down at her. "You didn't have a scar, then. You were . . . unblemished. Unblemished Maggie with a whole appendix."

"Silly," she said, stretching lazily. "We get older, Steve. That's my beauty mark. It's only a year old—and I'll *not* have you making light of my beauty."

"I'm not. You know I'm not." He put his hand under her chin and turned her face toward him. "You know you're beautiful. Damn you." Then he grinned again. "Though a bit worn at the moment. A bit pale, perhaps."

"And why not, with you wearing all my lipstick?"

"It undoubtedly looked better on you."

"It should; it's enough trouble to get. I have to send to San Francisco for it. A special lipstick—for a special woman?" It was a question.

"You are a special woman, Maggie."

"Maggie." She got a strange, almost frightened look on her face for a moment, then it went away and her features became harder, more sensual. She closed

her eyes and opened them slowly, then pursed her lips and, again, kissed the air at her mouth.

He leaned toward her, her face growing larger, her lips becoming monstrous in his eyes as he bent closer to kiss her again and again. . . .

Just before he fell asleep, Steve wondered drowsily why it was that the boy with the liquor had never come.

STEVE awoke in the morning with the momentary lack of orientation that strange surroundings often bring. He heard someone walk softly across the floor and remembered where he was. Steve's eyes were heavy; he couldn't have slept very long. He was sure of that.

Soon he heard water running in the bathroom and the rhythmic scraping and swishing that meant Margo was brushing her teeth. What the devil? She couldn't be getting up at this ungodly hour.

He remembered all of the night before as some of the sleepiness left his brain. Coming to Metro City with Cotton, meeting Margo, coming here. He thought of Margo. Beautiful, with violent

sensuality; strangely moody; tall, smooth-skinned and languorous. Poised and assured, sure of herself and, perhaps, just a little hard, a little too worldly-wise. So different from little Christine.

Christine.

He broke off in his thoughts, surprised that in Margo's house he was starting to think, not of Margo, but of Chris . . .

Downtown, in her apartment in the Bremont on Blaine Street, Christine Lawton was also thinking of Steve. Fresh from a cold shower, she rubbed down with a soft blue towel. Nice-looking man, she thought. Maybe a little shy, but he seemed like a pleasant Joe. No crashing intellect, perhaps, but smart enough. And they'd been having fun—a lot of fun—until that . . . that witch breezed in. That Margo with her *darlings*, and herself half out of her dress.

The menace!

Of course, Steve Bennett was just another guy—she didn't intend to get serious with anyone. She was only twenty-two. Plenty of time for that. But she frowned remembering the irritation she'd felt when she saw the way Steve stared at Margo, and remembering the sudden pain she'd felt when he'd mumbled he was leaving early. She shrugged and

started dressing in a trim tan suit to wear down to the *Cryer*. There were some odds and ends she'd been meaning to get out of the way for a week. Besides, she couldn't sleep.

She locked the door of her apartment, walked down onto Blaine Street, and turned toward *Dan's Hamburger Hut*. Time for a roll and coffee before starting down to the paper.

She'd have walked faster if she'd known Steve Bennett, himself, would be buying her a steak, of all things, in less than five minutes.

Steve forced himself to stop thinking about Chris and dressed quickly, his mind a little fuzzy from lack of sleep. When he put on his coat, he discovered that he'd lost the middle button somewhere, and he swore softly in irritation. He noticed the lights were on and it was still dark outside.

Margo came out of the bathroom. She was completely dressed and had put on powder and the vivid red lipstick.

"Morning, my beauty," Steve said sleepily. "What the dickens comes off? Still dark and here you're up and about."

She said quickly, but with

strain in her voice, "You've got to get out of here. Right now."

Steve shook his head to clear away the cobwebs of sleep. "What's the hurry? Relax, Margo. You'll live longer."

"Shut up!"

He blinked at the violence of her tone and stepped toward her. Frowning, he asked, "What'd I say now? What's the matter?"

She smiled. It was a tight smile that tried to be pleasant. "Nothing," she said. "I'm sorry, Steve. It's just that I'm sleepy and tired and grumpy. I'm always grumpy in the morning."

He grinned. "Glad I found that out." He reached for her to kiss her, but she jerked away.

"No!" she snapped. Then softer, "It's too early for that sort of thing."

"Never too early," he chuckled.

She said, "Come on."

"Come on? Where?"

"I told you, you've got to get out of here. I'll drive you downtown."

"Now? You mean right now?" Steve scraped a hand across the short stubble on his chin. "Let me pull myself together. You got a loose razor around?"

"No. You can clean up later. Come on." She started toward the door.

"I'll be damned. You really mean it."

She turned. "Of course I do. I explained to you last night. Before we ever came here."

"What time is it?"

"A little after five. Don't just stand there. It'll be getting light soon."

Irritation flickered across Steve's tanned face. "So it gets light!" he growled. "You wait a minute. I lost a damned button around here somewhere. Had it last night. Probably on the floor." He walked over by the chair near the bed and glanced underneath it. "You can sure as hell allow me fifteen seconds, Margo."

"What is it, gold?" she asked sarcastically. "Forget it."

Steve straightened and looked at her, anger beginning to darken his features. She noticed, and immediately her manner softened. "I told you I was grumpy in the morning, Steve. Don't—don't get angry and obstinate now." She licked her lips, and when Steve continued to stare at her, frowning, she walked quickly past him to the dresser, rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a card of brown buttons, then with needle and dark thread she walked back to Steve and hurriedly sewed the button on his coat.

She smiled up at him and said sweetly, "There, now, all better, little man? See? I'm quite domestic."

Something that Margo had done or said had momentarily puzzled Steve, but now he couldn't pin down what it was. He pursued the elusive thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"Let's go," Margo said. "Really, Steve."

He looked around to make sure he had all his belongings. He had only the clothes he was wearing; his wallet was in his trousers pocket. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

They didn't speak as Margo started the car and headed back toward downtown Metro City. Steve ran a finger through his thick black hair, remembering he hadn't even stopped to comb it. He took a comb from his pocket and jerked at the tangled strands. He muttered, "You're the damndest female," but Margo didn't answer.

They drove in silence. Steve's mind probed Margo's strangeness and he watched her as she drove, gripping the steering wheel with her long, tapering fingers.

Perhaps he should have been running, running away from her, from Metro City, from all the

horror waiting for him down the dark road that unwound ahead of them.

But he couldn't know, then, that in less than an hour he'd be staring, frantic, at the cold, rigid features of a dead man . . .

5

IN PAULSEN'S FUNERAL HOME, Steve, and the two police officers, stood staring down at the dead man.

As the shock sickened him with its impact, Steve thought helplessly that it seemed strange not to see Cotton grinning or laughing.

That was his first thought and, for seconds, it was the only thought that grew in his mind. Steve Bennett had never seen a dead man before except those cardboard men murdered during the second World War. Certainly he had never seen death like this, with folded arms and straightened limbs placed on display in obscene mockery of the life that was over.

The ride in the car to Police Headquarters was, and would always remain, blurred and incomplete in Steve's memory. There were questions, but he didn't answer any of them. He sat quietly, coming to realize with the slow

and halting stupidity of shock, that Cotton was dead and he, himself, was mired in it somehow. He wasn't really frightened yet for himself.

Then he was standing before a counter and they'd taken his ring and watch and everything from his pockets. Matt handed the man behind the counter Steve's wallet with his money in it. Then he was in a sparsely furnished room with Matt and Riley and another man. They all hammered questions at him and Steve told them the truth, that he hadn't killed anyone, that he didn't know anything about it. He came back almost to normal mentally, with the shock wearing off and hate giving him purpose.

Matt leaned forward and said conversationally, "See, here's the dough. We got it out of your room where you hid it. You didn't hide it very good." Matt held out a thick roll of bills and Steve looked at them uncomprehendingly, aware of their green color and the brownish line streaking the edges of the bills like tinting that's sometimes on the edges of book pages.

"That money," Steve said quietly. "What are you talking about? I never saw it before."

"Come on. Sure you did. You

saw it when you took it off his body. You took the dough out of the wallet in his coat and hid it in your room. Where'd you go then?"

"You're all wrong." Steve looked again at the bills extended in Matt's hand and his stomach churned with sickness when he realized the brownish stain on the money was Cotton's blood.

"I was with a woman," he said. "She'll tell you."

He realized that all the men were laughing.

He looked around at them and Joe Riley hunched his big shoulders and leaned forward. "Bennett," he said, "why don't you come clean with us? It'll make it easier on you. That woman gag's the oldest alibi in the world. It's just no good this year."

"But it's true!" Steve exploded. "Are you all crazy? And that can't possibly be Cotton's money. He didn't have that kind of money. He only had a few dollars."

Joe grunted. "The money you had when we picked you up—you said you won it. You probably said that because it was the first thing that popped into your mind, maybe. See, you knew Clay won this money last night, himself, so you naturally let that pop into your mind. There's nearly

five grand there. Now, isn't that right?"

"It's *not* right. He didn't win any money. Maybe a few dollars, no more than that."

Riley pushed Matt aside and sat down in the chair, looking at Steve. His eyes seemed slightly puzzled. He said, "Look, Bennett. We been pretty nice to you. No bad time, right? You know what I mean?"

Steve nodded slowly. He supposed Riley was just as much against him as Matt, but somehow the big burly cop seemed fairer, more friendly.

"O.K.," Riley went on. "You were at the *Cockatoo* last night. With Clay, this Cotton."

Steve nodded again. "Till sometime between eight and nine. I left then. I think it was around eight-thirty."

"Anyway, you were there. You saw Cotton win this money. A lot of money."

"No. He didn't."

Riley's jaws clamped together, then relaxed. "Don't be dumb, Bennett. We're not *that* stupid. We checked. He won it all right, that we know. We checked the club; we talked to the cashier that paid him the dough. We talked to people in the club that *saw* him win it. He had a hell of a

hot streak. There isn't any doubt about it. Now don't be silly; you're just getting yourself in deeper."

Steve tried to gather his spinning thoughts. He couldn't understand. Things were mixed up, but he could prove he didn't do it. He was sure of that. The only important thing was that Cotton was dead.

He said, "I've told you the truth. All along. Why don't you look for whoever killed him?"

They smiled and looked at each other as if they were enjoying a joke.

There were other questions, but finally Steve stopped talking and closed his eyes. He didn't answer them when they spoke to him. Finally they gave up and took him to a cell and put him inside. They swung the heavy metal door shut and locked it.

6

IN THE afternoon Steve hammered on the bars of his cell. The jailer walked over and yelled, "Shut the hell up, mister. You want a bath?"

"I want to see Sergeant Riley. I want to talk to him."

"What about?"

"I'll tell Riley."

"Sorry." It was a curt dismissal.

The turnkey started to walk away.

Steve pressed close to the bars and said desperately, "It's important. I think he'd want to talk to me."

"Sure, mister. Sure he would."

"It's about . . . about the murder. I won't talk to anybody but Riley."

The turnkey stared at him. "I'll think about it. Maybe I'll tell him." He walked out of sight down the short corridor.

Steve turned back into his cell. It was a bare room about eight feet square with two rigid iron cots fixed to the left wall, one above the other like bunk beds. The lower cot was supported on the side away from the wall by an iron bar at both the head and foot of the bed, the bars extending from the bed frame down to the concrete floor. The upper bed was bolted to the metal wall and had chains at both outer ends of the bed extending from the frame up to the wall where they were securely fastened. In the far corner was a white toilet, and to the left of it was a small window opposite the cell door. The window was crisscrossed with rectangular iron bars. Steve noticed that no solid objects in the cell were movable. Certainly there was

nothing that remotely approached the status of a weapon. Not that any kind of weapon would have done him much good. He shrugged his shoulders and threw himself down on the single gray-wool blanket on top of the mattress on the lower bunk.

An hour later Riley walked up to the door of the cell. "Well, Bennett," he asked, "you decide to tell me about it finally?"

"I thought of some things," Steve said. "I had time to think about everything."

Riley scratched the side of his broad face. "I figured you'd get around to it."

"It's not what you think; it's something else. I don't mean I killed him. I didn't. I can't confess to something I didn't do."

"Damn it!" Riley's face showed momentary anger. "What the hell you call me back here for?"

Steve leaned close against the cell door and spoke quickly. "Just a minute, Riley. I don't know, but you seemed different from that other guy, Matt. Now, if there was just a little chance that I didn't kill Cotton, you'd want to know it. Wouldn't you?"

"Sure, Bennett. Only there's not a chance. Not a chance in the world."

Riley's positive assurance was

frightening. Steve said, "Listen. This morning sometime when you were questioning me in the room or after I was stuck in here, you said something about my taking part of the money and hiding the rest in the room. What was that all about again?"

Riley wagged his head back and forth and beat slowly against a bar of the cell door with one big hand. He said slowly through his teeth, "Damn it to hell! You're either the most stupid man I ever saw, or—" He broke off and jerked his head at the turnkey. He left his gun with the turnkey who unlocked the cell door and let him inside with Steve.

He sat down on the cot and Steve squatted on the floor. Riley said heavily, "I don't know why I waste the time. I'll give it all to you, Bennett, then maybe you give up and spill the story to me."

"Clay won almost an even six grand at the *Cockatoo*." Riley smiled slightly and added in a weary voice, "Maybe there isn't any gambling in this town, but anyway he won the dough at the *Cockatoo*. The cashier paid him the money—I talked to him myself and he remembered because it was a pretty fair wad of dough, and he remembered Clay because he was such a long, ugly guy and

he had that funny kind of yellowish hair. O.K. The dough was all in hundred-dollar bills and they were all in sequence. You know, the serial numbers all in order just like they come from the bank. When we found the dough after we got the call on the body, we noticed the serial numbers were all in a row. Only there wasn't as much cash there as Clay was supposed to have won. Eleven hundred bucks was gone; eleven of the bills just weren't there."

Riley shrugged his broad shoulders and added, looking at Steve, "And you know why. Because they were the bills you peeled off the roll and put in your wallet before you hid the rest of them. And the serial numbers match; they go right along in sequence."

Steve said desperately, "But that's impossible. The money I had, I won. I won it at roulette; I can prove it. Look. I can prove it by the cashier. He was a red-faced guy with a lower lip that hung out loose-like. He'd remember. And something else about him. I told you when you first picked me up, that Cotton came here to meet a guy at the *Cockatoo*. Cotton told me he didn't know the guy, but on the phone he had a funny, twangy voice—just like the cashier's voice."

"Cotton said it was the cashier?"

"Well, no, but I talked to the cashier and told Cotton about it. Probably Cotton saw that same cashier after I left. Anyway that cashier would remember me. I even talked to him about getting a little lucky."



Riley shook his head.

Steve hurried on, "And the girl was with me. She can back me up on everything. Can . . . can you keep her out of it? I mean, keep her name out of it completely?"

"Sure," Riley said, as if he were talking to a child. "Sure, Bennett."

"She's Margo Whitney. I thought she'd be down before this, but she must not know what's happened. But she'll tell you we left the club together and that we were together all night. When was Cotton killed? When did it happen?"

"Between twelve and one this morning. Shot in the chest. You could probably give me a closer time."

"She'll clear me on that—and the money, too; she saw me get it. And the cashier, he'll remember if you ask him about it!"

"Margo Whitney," said Riley.

"Yes. That's right."

"She's the one that's going to sing at the *Cockatoo*?"

"That's her."

"Tall, hot-looking number? Black hair?"

"Yes, that's her all right. She'll tell you. But keep her name out of it—I wouldn't want her to get in trouble over it."

"No," Riley said. "Of course not." But he didn't get up.

Steve said violently, "Well, go see her. I want to get out of this damn place."

Riley was quiet for a moment, then asked savagely, "What are you trying to pull, Bennett? What do you think all this noise is gonna get you?"

"Look," Steve groaned, shaking his head, "why the hell don't you just check on this—see the cashier and Margo Whitney? It's so damn simple!"

"Simple. Yeah. Let me tell you something, Bennett. You kind of puzzled me a little this morning.

I knew you killed the guy, but you acted a little screwy."

"I *didn't*—" Steve began angrily, but Riley interrupted him and continued.

"You didn't act right so I nosed around. Just for fun. This Cotton had a match book from the *Cockatoo* in his pocket when we got to him a little after one this morning and I'd already been up there. But just to play it safe I check the club again, and nobody remembers you. No cashier, for sure."

"He was a pink-faced guy. Had a long droopy under lip. If you'd just asked him—"

Riley's voice showed a trace of annoyance. "Let me finish, will you? I didn't see any cashier looked like that. I saw this guy, Gross, and he tells me Clay left the club with one of the cashiers. I checked on the cashier, but I haven't located him yet—even checked his home, but he's not there." Riley paused and squinted at Steve. "You wouldn't be able to help me locate him, would you, Bennett?"

"Me? What the hell you getting at, Riley?"

Riley shrugged. "This cashier might be the one you been worrying about, maybe not. It's not important."

"It is important. You've got to talk to him."

"Well, anyway, nobody I saw from the *Cockatoo* remembers you winning any dough. Gross also tells me you left with the Whitney dame, so I went out and talked to her. She said you were up at her place—"

"You *saw* her? What the hell? What the hell am I doing in jail?"

"She said you were there," Riley continued impassively. "She said you came up and had one drink and were out of there by nine-thirty last night."

7

STEVE had dozed fitfully during the afternoon, and now he could tell by looking from the barred window of his cell that it was night. A single small light bulb burned in the corridor, its illumination barely filtering into Steve's cell. He was going to choke the truth out of Margo.

A guard opened the door at the end of the corridor and walked the length of the cell block.

Steve stood up and asked him, "What time is it?"

"Night time."

Steve clenched his fists and walked to the cell door. "Listen.

I want a lawyer. I'm innocent and you've got to give me a lawyer."

"Sure. It's too late now. In the morning you can have a dozen lawyers."

"You're lying to me," Steve said. "You're plotting against me. You're *all* against me."

The guard flashed his light into Steve's face. "What's the matter with you, mister?"

In the reflected glow Steve could see the other's features. The man was young, in his early twenties. He was frowning slightly.

"Nothin's the matter with me," Steve said. "You're a new one. They sent you to spy on me. Didn't they? *Didn't they?*"

The cop turned off his light, then flashed it on again. He kept it on Steve's face.

He said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I want my mother."

"You what?"

"I want my mother."

"Your mother?"

"And my father. And my wife."

"You crazy? You haven't got a wife. You . . . crazy?"

Steve shook the bars and raised his voice. "Let me out of here! Let me out!" Then he lowered his voice, scratched his chin and said conversationally, "I'm going

to get you, boy. You watch. I'll get you. I know you're one of them."

"You want a hose turned on you?"

"I want a priest. I demand a priest."

The cop's voice was harsh, "You shut up and go to sleep. Shut up or I'll . . ." He turned and left suddenly.

Steve watched him go. The police had emptied his pockets, but left him his own clothes, and now Steve took off his coat and threw it onto the cot so that his arms would be free for what he planned to do next. He walked to the cot and fumbled for the blanket.

Using his teeth and arms he managed to tear three strips about four feet long from the width of the blanket. He knotted these together, then passed the crude rope around one of the vertical bars in his cell window. He wrapped one of the loose ends snugly about his neck and tucked its end and the other end under the wool band against his skin.

He carefully tested the home-made noose, letting much of the weight of his body slump against the band about his neck. It held without slipping and pressed

against his throat. Almost immediately he could feel the pressure growing in his head, against the front of his face and behind his eyes.

The bar around which the blanket-rope was looped was only about five feet from the floor, so when Steve let his body slump against the noose, his legs bent sharply at the knees. He was careful to keep his feet directly under him so that he had no trouble standing up straight again. Even so, his eyes were watering.

Steve knew that strangulation, by cutting off the vital blood supply to the brain, could cause almost instantaneous unconsciousness. He carefully placed his feet; he didn't want to hang himself accidentally. Steve knew also, and naturally the police would know, that a body needn't swing free for a man to hang himself. A doorknob or bedpost would have worked as well as the cell bar.

Steve leaned against the wall and waited.

He had to wait almost half an hour and his joints were starting to ache from the limited and cramped position before he heard the soft opening and closing of the door at the end of the corridor. The light swelled briefly out-

side the cell, then was cut off as the door shut.

Immediately Steve slumped down against the wall, the band tightening around his throat. He kept as much of his weight on the balls of his feet as he could without making his deception obvious. The dim light would help. Steve's right hand hung limply at his side where it could be quickly balled into a fist and swung. He held his breath, strained air against his mouth and could feel his face getting a little puffy and flushed.

The cop walked directly to Steve's cell and flashed his light on the cot.

"Hey," he said softly, "you feel better?"

It was the same young guard and at first he didn't see Steve outside the ring of light from his flash. He noted the empty cot and with a muttered, "What the—" swung his flashlight around the cell.

The beam of light fell on Steve's slumped body dangling from the strips of blanket and the jailer sucked in his breath with a gasp.

"Hey!" he said. "Hey." He was cautious and undecided.

Steve's heart was beginning to

labor strenuously and his head spun with dizziness. Red spots started to float before his eyes.

THE jailer hesitated only a moment longer, then took keys from his belt and unlocked the cell door. Steve caught the glimmer of light as the officer drew a gun and held it before him, but Steve hung motionless, wondering if he could last till the guard reached him.

The guard seemed to move with incredible slowness, the flashlight in one hand, the gun in the other, but finally he was close to Steve and reached with the hand holding the flashlight, to touch Steve's face.

Steve, dizzy, but knowing this would be his only chance, clenched his right fist at the same time he tensed the muscles in his legs and shoved himself upward and close to the officer. He whipped his right hand in a long, swift arc, straining with his blurred vision to direct his hard fist to the man's jaw, concentrating all his strength and power into his right arm and fist. He knew if he didn't hit him and hit him hard this first time he probably

wouldn't get another chance, handicapped as he was by the strips around his throat.

He felt his hand crash solidly into the other's face and heard the clatter of the man's gun and flashlight against the concrete floor even as sharp pain dug into his knuckles.

It had taken only a fraction of a second and Steve clawed at the restraining bands wrapped about his neck. He jerked them free and lunged toward the man, now visible in the gleam of the flash, sinking to his knees. Steve didn't try to guess whether the man was out or only stunned. He grabbed him by the throat to stifle any possible outcry, then swung the man's body downward and slammed his head against the solid floor.

The dull clump of the man's head striking concrete sent a ripple of nausea through Steve's stomach and stifled the desperate urgency that had filled him for the past seconds.

In sudden fright and worry he knelt by the unconscious man and fumbled to find his pulse and heartbeat. Relief stilled his fright when he found the pulse strong and the breathing slow but steady. He knelt on the floor for a moment to slow his own breath

and heartbeat. Then he slipped the cop's .38 into his own pants' pocket.

He crept out of the cell and into the corridor. As he walked its length and paused before the door leading into the office, he could feel his heart beginning to pound heavily again.

Damn! Steve could feel the cold seeping into his flesh now, and he remembered his coat back on the cot. No time to go back now.

He gripped the door handle solidly in his palm, lifted as he turned and pulled gently backwards. The door moved and a thin sheet of light crowded through and fell against his face. Steve cracked the door a little farther and peered through into the office.

He could see the door at the opposite end of the office standing wide open, light splashing a little way outside onto the ground and dark green shrubs. Outside. Out in the open, where at least a man could run.

He could see no one in the office, but his view of part of the left side of the room was blocked. Slowly, holding his breath, he eased the door open far enough for him to slip his body through.

On his left, ten feet away, a

uniformed policeman sat with his back toward Steve. He was leaning forward with his left elbow resting on the counter in front of him, his right hand loosely grasping the base of a small microphone. He spoke into the microphone, saying something that was only a blur of words to Steve, describing a stolen car. Then another voice broke in, repeating the license number.

Steve waited only a moment longer, then sure that no one else was in the room, he stepped quietly inside. He inched one foot in front of the other, every second getting nearer to the open door, but keeping his eyes fixed on the policeman so that he might notice any change in his position or sign of alarm.

The officer didn't move, but kept on talking.

Steve took another step and his right foot scraped against the leg of a chair set out from the wall. He swung his eyes, panicked, to the chair, then back to the officer.

The policeman swiveled his head around slowly, incuriously. He stared at Steve for a brief moment and opened his mouth as if to speak, the hand mike still held loosely in his right hand. Then his jaw dropped, he slowly placed

the microphone back on the counter; his eyes widened swiftly and he started to scramble to his feet.

For an instant Steve was paralyzed, then as the policeman dug with his right hand for the gun at his hip, Steve turned and ran toward the open door and through it.

Behind him the officer yelled, "Stop!" and ran after Steve, his feet pounding on the floor. Steve sprinted with all his strength down the street outside. Street lights lined the paving but their glow was feeble and Steve searched for a darker avenue of escape.

The cry of "Stop!" came from behind him again, followed by the sharp crack of a gun. Steve heard the ugly whine as the bullet sped over his head and then he saw on his left an alley that was narrow and dark and pointed out of town. He turned and ran into the alley as another shot was fired and another bullet sped by him, but farther away this time.

A kind of exhilaration swept over Steve, though his heart labored and his lungs and throat ached with the pain of continuing to run, as he finally knew that no matter what happened right now or later, and even

though he was running, running, at least he was outside.

8

STEVE awoke for the fourth or fifth time, cold and miserable. A light fog hung low over the earth and dampness seemed to have been blotted up by his bones.

He had run out of the darkened streets of the city and into the countryside beyond until his burning lungs and aching legs forced him to stop. He found a hollow at the base of a small hill where he curled up and tried to rest, his leg muscles twitching uncontrollably. From time to time he heard the ugly shriek of sirens, the anguished scream like a kitten in a dog's mouth.

Now he sat up, uncomfortable and still a little weak with the reaction of flight, but more rested and at least able to think.

He thought of Chris.

If he could reach her she'd hide him, give him a chance to clean up and get food and rest. After that he wasn't sure what he was going to do.

He got to his feet and began walking slowly, back toward the fear he'd run blindly away from.

An hour later Steve had reached the outskirts of the city,

the dimly-lighted residential district, and after following a couple of false avenues, finally found the street he thought was the one down which Margo had driven him yesterday.

Finally, he saw the neon sign, *Dan's Hamburger Hut*. Almost there now; just two or three more blocks.

Then he was standing before the door of apartment seven at 4212 Blaine Street and he'd found Chris. At least he'd found her apartment.

He knocked softly, waited, then knocked again.

There were sounds of movement inside, then Chris' voice saying, "Who is it?"

"Chris? Let me in."

"Who is it?"

"Steve. Steve Bennett."

For a long moment nothing happened, then the door was pulled open and Chris, a cotton robe thrown hastily over her shoulders and her hair rumpled from sleep, stared at Steve for several seconds.

Finally he said, "Don't I get asked in, Chris?"

"Oh . . . yes, of course."

He stepped inside and asked, "You alone?"

"Yes, Steve. What happened to you? You look terrible."

"Guess I do. I got out of jail, busted out—"

"I know. I know all about that, but where have you been? Where'd you go?"

"I hardly know. I ran till I couldn't run any more, then I tried to sleep."

She nodded toward the couch. "Sit down," she said. "You look worn out."

He relaxed into the cushions and said, "I hate to bust in on you, Chris, but frankly I don't know where else I could have gone. Every cop in town must be looking for me."

"Just about." Her manner seemed a little odd, Steve thought. Almost as if she were afraid of him. But that didn't make sense. She went on, "There was a broadcast and then I went down to the *Cryer* and got all they had on it. Then I came back here and tried to sleep." She was quiet for a moment, then she asked, "Steve, what are you going to do?"

He leaned forward. "I'm not sure *how* I'll do it, but I've got a pretty good idea what I've got to do. I have to think it out a little more, but after I ran out of town I had time to figure a little—"

For the first time an expression of concern passed over her face.

"I'm sorry," she interrupted him. "You must be tired and hungry. I didn't even think. You lie down there and I'll fix something."

He started to object, but she was out in the kitchen making noises with pots and pans.

With three fried eggs and toast and jelly inside him, Steve leaned back from the kitchen table with a contented sigh. He sipped his coffee and grinned across the table at Chris. "Thanks. I feel like I could run all the way to Florida now."

She frowned. "Are you? Going to run, I mean?"

"No."

"Steve." She looked down at the clean tablecloth, then up at him again. "None of it's true, is it? You didn't . . . haven't done anything wrong?"

Now it was his turn to frown. "No, Chris. I swear I haven't. I didn't kill Cotton, Chris." He paused a moment, then said softly, "Don't you believe me, Chris?"

She hesitated only a moment, then smiled brightly at him. "I believe you, Steve. I've been a little silly. It's just that so much . . ." She let the phrase trail off.

He said, "Believe me, I haven't

done a damn thing wrong except bust out of jail." He sat up suddenly. "Good Lord! How's that cop I slugged? Do you know?"

"He's all right. They took him to the hospital for X-rays, but there's nothing wrong with him except a bad headache. He—" she hesitated, then went on—"swore you were mad as a hatter."

Steve laughed out loud, amused and at the same time filled with relief that the young officer was all right. "I guess maybe he would at that." He got solemn and looked at her. "But that's all, Chris. I swear it. The rest of it's just crazy."

He finished his coffee and lit a cigarette from a pack she'd put by his plate. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the bite of the smoke against his throat. Then he leaned forward with his elbows on the table.

"Here's the way it stacks up," he said. "I've got to see Margo and make her tell the truth. The other thing—about the eleven hundred dollars that was on me—that should be a cinch. That's one of the strongest points against me. All I've got to do is get to the cashier who paid me off and once he sees me I know he'll remember."

Chris was looking at him

strangely. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't you know?"

"Don't I know what?"

"No, of course you wouldn't." She swallowed. "The cashier's dead."

Steve jumped to his feet. "He's *what?*"

"He's dead. He was murdered."

Steve started to speak, then forced himself to relax and sit down in his chair. He tried to think, but Chris was still speaking.

She said, "He was murdered with the same gun that killed Cotton. They found it a few yards from the cashier's body. As if somebody had dropped it there."

Steve's mind was racing. "That might be good," he told her excitedly. "Maybe it proves I couldn't have had the gun. If I was in jail—"

She shook her head slowly. "No, Steve. It was the same night. Not long after Cotton was killed. Before the police ever picked you up."

"But that's preposterous," he said angrily. "The police can't possibly think—"

"Steve." She moved her chair around beside him and took his hand. For a moment it was very

quiet, then she said slowly, "That's what they do think. It's more than that, Steve. As far as the police are concerned, they *know* you killed the cashier. And Cotton. They were both killed with the same gun—and they traced the gun. It was your gun, Steve."

Steve sat without moving for a moment, too amazed to say anything. But Chris kept on, speaking softly. "He—the cashier—was pretty well beaten up; there'd been a fight, apparently, with . . . whoever killed him. He had a button in his right hand, and the police found out it was from your coat. Guess they still have the coat at the station. And he had skin under the fingernails of his right hand. He'd—he'd scratched somebody in the fight."

Steve slowly put one hand to his scratched cheek, then got up and walked into the front room of the apartment. He sat down and buried his head in his hands.

Chris came in and sat down beside him. "Don't let it get you, Steve. I know it's bad, but there's always something you can do."

He looked at her and grinned stiffly. "I'm not feeling sorry for myself, if that's what you mean. I'm just mad. I'm damned mad. That threw me for a minute, but only because I hadn't expected it

—and that's been my trouble all along. Not expecting the next trick. And that's the right word. Trick." He paused, then said wonderingly, "Skin under his fingernails. Chris, what do you bet that's my skin?"

"Steve!" She looked a little frightened again.

He said hastily, "Don't get me wrong; I haven't lied to you. Yesterday morning in Dan's cafe you . . . guessed how I got this." He tapped the marks on his cheek. "Well, you were right." Steve got up and went into the kitchen for the pack of cigarettes, lighted one and came back. He paced the floor and said matter of factly, "I've been framed by an expert."

Chris watched him but didn't say anything.

"Oh, brother, it's beautiful." He stopped pacing suddenly. "If I were still in jail I wouldn't have a single, solitary chance. Or if I get tossed back in. That's the only thing that wasn't figured in the frame: that I'd manage to bust out. I'm supposed to be stuck in a cell with everything stacked neatly against me." He sighed. "Well, as long as I'm out, I've got a chance."

Chris said, "I'm glad you feel that way, Steve. And I'll help. If there's anything I can do."

"Maybe you can help. I can't get much information by myself." He turned to face her. "How'd they trace the gun?"

"By the serial number. It had been filed, but they brought it out. The paper didn't have that, but I got it from a fellow I know on the force. He was on the radio when you ran out. I . . . think he took a shot at you."

"He did. I remember him, all right."

She grinned, "He was glad to tell me anything I wanted to know; he's kind of sweet on me."

"He's smart."

"Why, Mr. Bennett. That's the nicest thing you ever said to me." She laughed.

"I guess you're right, Chris. I'm—sort of stupid sometimes." He broke off quickly, "The gun?"

She continued, "By checking the serial number they traced it to your store in Laguna Beach. Then they discovered you'd made out some kind of papers you keep on gun sales so it'd look like you'd sold it. Sort of cover up the fact that it was your gun—at least that's what they think."

"The gun wasn't listed as sold to me, was it? That wouldn't make sense."

"No. But the papers were made out showing sale to a Phillip

Knowle who apparently doesn't exist, at an address that doesn't exist either. The police think you did that just to cover yourself in case they got hold of the gun."

Steve ground his teeth together. He said slowly, "Sure. Every gun in the store is listed by serial number at the factory that made it and with the jobber that shipped it to the store. The number is on the papers listing the sale, too. I do remember selling a gun to a man who gave the name of Knowle. It was on Monday, I think." He began pacing the floor again.

"What time did I break out, do you know?"

"It was around nine—" she glanced at her watch "—last night. It's almost breakfast time now."

Steve said, "Well, anyway, I've got a gun now. Tonight I'll—"

"I've been waiting for you to mention that," said Chris quietly. "The police are raving about you taking a cop's gun."

9

HE PULLED the gun from his trousers and held it in his hand.

Chris recoiled slightly from the gun, leaning back against the arm of the divan. "Steve," she com-

plained, "put it away. I don't want to see it." She put her hand over his and asked, "Won't you forget about guns? It only means more trouble. You haven't killed anybody yet, but if you start running around with a gun you might."

"You're darn right I might. If I have to." He noticed the expression of distaste on her face



and continued less violently, "I only mean if I'm forced to, Chris. Not the police or anything like that. I mean if there isn't any other way and I find out for sure who murdered Cotton."

She stared at him for a moment, then asked, "For sure? You mean you think you know who—who's really guilty?"

He nodded. "I think so. Tonight I'm going to try to see Margo Whitney. She blasted my alibi wide open and she had to lie to do it. I want to know why.

And I also want to talk to the big boy who runs the *Cockatoo*."

"Gross?"

"Oscar Gross, himself."

"He gives me the shivers. You have evidence against him, Steve?"

"Not exactly. But I'm sure going to see him. And Margo."

Chris tucked her shapely legs underneath her and smoothed her skirt. She leaned her arms on the back of the divan and said, "You're going to see them tonight?"

"I am."

"Bound and determined?"

"Bound and determined."

She squared her small jaw and stuck out her under lip. "Then I'll go with you."

He laughed, then stopped when he saw the hurt look on her face.

"Is that so awfully silly?" she asked emphatically.

"Of course not," he said quickly. "You just looked so darn cute. Like you were about to eat somebody up. But it's no good, Chris. You're my base of operations, it looks like. This way I know there's always somebody that knows the story, somebody I can call for help or give information to."

"Well," she frowned, mollified, "all right. But I still don't like your going out there." Then,

"Steve, you must be about dead. Why don't you crawl in my bed?"

He grinned widely and she added, coloring, "*I'm* going to work!"

"If you must."

"I must. If I didn't they'd wonder why I wasn't there and maybe send someone around to check—" She stopped suddenly and put a hand over her mouth, blushing again. "Besides," she added, "I want to find out what's come in to the paper."

"Good. See if I've killed anybody else. I'd like to know."

"None of that, Steve," she said. "You hungry?"

"Just tired."

"Go to bed then. If you get hungry later there's lots in the refrigerator. I've got to run."

"Already?"

"I'd . . . better."

Steve felt his face and asked, "You don't happen to have a razor, do you?"

"Nope. I'll try to get you one while I'm gone today."

Steve frowned a few seconds, thinking, then he said, "While you're at it, think you could dig up a flashlight, a couple of thin chisels and a roll of adhesive tape? And all the skeleton keys you can find. I'll also need a

jacket of some sort. Thirty-eight. Too large an order?"

"Not too large. I'll work on it. Well, g'bye."

"Wait, Chris." Steve got up and stopped her as she turned to go. He took her by the arms and said, smiling, "For luck." He kissed her gently on the lips, and for a moment her arms went around him. Then she was at the door saying, "Gotta run; now you be quiet today," and the door shut behind her.

Steve stood looking at the closed door for a moment, thinking Christine Lawton was a damn swell little gal. It occurred to Steve that he never had bought Chris that steak he'd promised her. He stretched, pulling at his weary muscles, then turned and went into the bedroom. . . .

He did not awaken until late at night—ten o'clock by the luminous dial of the clock by his bed—and he could hear the faint noises of movement in the living room and kitchen. Apparently Chris, knowing he was dead tired, had decided to let him sleep.

He dressed quickly and walked into the living room. Chris heard him and came out of the kitchen.

"Hi, there," she said cheerily. "You look better." She walked to the end table alongside the divan

and pointed down at it. Arrayed on the little table were two thin chisels, a ring of keys, a roll of white tape, a flashlight, and a conservative sports jacket. There was also a small square box which she picked up and tossed to him. "All present and accounted for," she said. "Now you owe me two steaks."

"Thanks, Chris," Steve said. "The jacket is fine," he added, trying it on. "I'll make it up to you. And—I missed you."

"I'll bet."

"Well, after I woke up." He waved the square box. "What's this?"

"That's to make you look even better. Razor and blades. The whole kit. Now get busy and use it." She smiled sweetly at him. "I want to see you pretty."

Five minutes later Steve came out of the bathroom, his face smooth. "How's that?"

"Lovely, Mr. Bennett." He walked over and sat by her on the divan, then started to put an arm around her shoulders. She stopped him, but her eyes twinkled.

"For luck?" he asked.

She smiled. "No, sir. That's just when one of us is leaving." The smile broadened into a mis-

chievous grin. "You might get *too* lucky."

They sat without speaking for several minutes, busy with their thoughts. Then Chris mentioned that Steve must be as starved as she was, and went into the kitchen to fix a meal for them.

Over coffee, they talked idly, casually, while the tension built up in both of them. Finally Chris looked at Steve and said in a tight voice, "Are you really going to . . . you know."

Steve nodded and looked at his watch. It was almost one in the morning. "Yeah, I'll try my luck in a few minutes," he said. "Streets should be pretty empty by now. I'll try Margo first. Want to help?"

"Of course."

"I want to be sure she's home before I go all the way out there. Phone her—as a curious reporter—and see if there's an answer. O.K.?"

She nodded, then made the call. She let the phone ring several times, but there was no answer. She hung up, talked to Steve for another fifteen minutes, then phoned again. She hung up, looked at Steve and shook her head.

"Well," he said. "I guess it's the *Cockatoo*—and Gross." He

stood up, went into the bedroom for the gun, then came back and took the articles off the end table and stuffed them in the pockets of his pants and jacket.

Chris walked over close to him and looked up into his face. "Don't, Steve. Don't go. Stay here."

"I've got to go. I can't stay here the rest of my life. This has to wind up sometime."

"Then leave the gun."

"No."

"Please, Steve. It scares me. You might kill someone. Or . . . get killed."

"Chris, I'm sorry. But I need the gun. There's more chance of finding out what I want—and less chance of my getting shot up if I can protect myself."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right."

Steve stuck the gun in his trousers. He swallowed. "Well, so long. There a back way out of here?"

She nodded. "Down the hall and left. Stairs there that come out in back. You can go down the alley."

"O.K. I'll . . . see you later, Chris. Maybe I'll be back in time for breakfast."

She shook her head. "I won't be here in the apartment, Steve.

I couldn't wait here. You go ahead. I'll go on down to the police station, see what's going on." She tried to grin at him. "Then if they haul you in on a stretcher, I'll know right way. See?"

Neither spoke for a moment, then Steve said, "Well, I'm off. That is, I'm now leaving." He stepped up beside her and smiled. "Uh, for luck?"

This time she didn't hesitate, didn't hold back. Her arms went around him, under his shoulders, and she pressed tightly against him as he kissed her.

Finally he released her.

For a moment she bit her lower lip and didn't speak. Then she smiled at him, a small, trembling smile, and rubbed her stomach. "I told you to leave that old gun," she said.

He turned quickly and went out and down the hall.

10

HE STOOD in the darkness of an unlighted doorway across the street from the *Cockatoo* and waited. It was two-fifteen A.M. and the last couple had walked out of the big double doors of the club five minutes before. The ten-foot-high cockatoo still burned brightly, but the only

other spot of light was from a curtained window on the second floor.

Steve stared at the window, knowing that it must be Gross up there in his office or bedroom. He waited, wondering whether to try sneaking in while Gross was there and suddenly confronting him, or to wait until he was asleep.

As Steve watched, the upstairs light winked out. Two minutes later the neon cockatoo over the doors went dark and the front of the club receded into drab shadows. Almost immediately a man came out and pulled the double doors shut behind him, then walked under the striped awning to the black Cadillac parked at the curb.

In the near darkness it was impossible for Steve to be positive of the man's identity, but he was a big man, about Gross' size, and there were not many men that tall and broad. Steve was sure it was Oscar Gross.

When Steve saw him, he was surprised at the violence of the emotions that coursed through him. His hand moved to grip the butt of the revolver at his waist, and for the first time in his life he actually wanted to kill a man. He pulled the gun halfway from

his trousers, then shoved it back. Killing Gross wouldn't help Cotton now—or Steve. And he hadn't come here to kill Gross—unless he had to. Besides, with Gross out of the club, this was a perfect opportunity for Steve to look around upstairs in the office.

The black Cadillac sedan pulled away from the curb. Steve watched it disappear down the street, then crossed to the double doors of the *Cockatoo*. They were locked, as Steve had expected, and none of his keys fit the lock, so he walked around the side of the building to the rear of the club. He knew that the men's rest room was in back, and that a frosted glass window was in the rest room wall, the outside wall of the *Cockatoo*. He found the frosted window; it was perfect for his purpose. He could reach it from the ground and it was more than large enough to admit his body.

He quickly took the roll of adhesive tape from his pocket, crisscrossed the glass with it, then hammered the window lightly with the base of his flashlight. The window cracked with very little sound, and in another minute Steve had pulled most of the glass outside and placed it on the

ground. Only one splinter of glass fell inside with a sharp tinkle, then Steve cleared the jagged pieces from the bottom edge of the window pane and hoisted himself through and inside.

He walked carefully into the dining room, using his flashlight only briefly, and then found the elevator he had once before taken to the gambling room upstairs. He entered it, pressed the black button in the wall panel, and the elevator started up.

Steve found himself becoming tense, nervous, and told himself to relax. The elevator stopped and Steve slid the door open and stepped into the darkness beyond it. He turned on the flashlight and walked down the hallway paralleling the casino to the door he'd seen Gross enter on that night he'd been up here with Margo. The last night, Steve thought, that he'd seen Cotton alive.

He fumbled for the keys in his pocket and tried the knob of the door. With a mild shock he felt the knob turn in his hand and the door swing inward. He paused for a moment, fright starting in him again as his hand closed around the cold butt of the .38 in his belt, then he shook the feeling off. After all, he'd

seen Gross leave and the club was locked; there'd be no reason, really, for Gross to lock the door of his private quarters when nobody was in the club.

But Steve took the gun from his belt and held it firmly in his right hand, the burning flashlight in his left, as he pushed open the door and stepped into the blackness of the room, then slowly pressed the door closed behind him. The only sound was the small click of the latch mechanism springing into its slot. He threw the beam of the flash around the room, over a filing cabinet on the right, then a divan, a large triangular brown desk with a swivel chair behind it, and two chairs near a closed door in the left wall.

Office here, Steve thought; bedroom through the door in the left wall. That took care of the two rooms in which Cotton had said Gross lived. This room, the office, was the one Steve wanted. He crossed to the odd triangular desk and looked it over. It was bare except for a french phone on the left edge, and a quart beer bottle, still half full, beyond the phone at the desk's corner. Steve touched the bottle and it was still cold, beaded with moisture. Apparently Gross had been having

a beer before he took off for wherever he'd gone.

Steve pulled the chisels from his pocket and flashed his light on the desk drawers. There was one drawer in the middle, and two on each side; Steve thrust a chisel up against the crack at the top of the middle drawer and shoved. He frowned, then rapped the edge of the desk lightly with the chisel. The sound of metal against metal mingled with Steve's soft curses. Steel. The damned desk was made of steel. Of all the stupid, asinine . . . Steve swore again, knowing that without the keys to the desk, a pair of sharp chisels were as effective as toothpicks. Short of getting an acetylene torch, about all he could do was scratch the desk's fancy simulated-wood paint job.

He was trying to think of his next move when light blazed suddenly in the room and momentarily blinded him after the near darkness.

He gasped and swung about, dropping the chisels and flashlight on the desk top with a crash, and bringing up the gun in his hand. In one blurred instant he saw the figure standing at the door leading to Gross' bedroom, pointed his gun at it, his finger tightening on the trigger,

and then saw it was Margo Whitney staring at him, her puzzled expression dissolving in fright.

"Steve!" she almost screamed. "What—how did you . . ." She stopped speaking, her mouth hanging open.

Steve jumped toward her, the gun held forward in his hand. "Freeze, baby," he said harshly. "Don't even breathe. You damn near got a hole in your belly."

HER teeth came together with a sharp click, and for a moment Steve thought Margo was going to faint. The corners of her mouth twitched and her face got white under the heavy makeup.

Steve didn't know whether it was her fright and obvious surprise, his hatred of her at the moment, or the memory of what she'd done to him, but she looked ugly. He did know this: that he had been pushed around, chased, deceived and lied to long enough—and that now it was his turn.

The repressed rage and frustration boiled over inside him and for a moment he saw Cotton's still face before him like a putty caricature. He whipped his open left hand hard across Margo's face twice, back and forth, jerking her head from side to side, the black

hair spinning. He said harshly, "You sure as hell *should* be surprised, Margo. You thought I'd be dead by now, didn't you? Or in jail, at least, for murders you and your lover pulled off."

She shrank back against the wall, staring at him, biting her lip. Then she seemed to recover from her first surprise, regain a little of her natural poise. "Steve," she said in a puzzled tone, "I don't understand. What—you *hit* me, Steve. What in the world do you mean, darling?"

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her farther into the room, forced her roughly onto the divan. "You know damn well what I mean," he said. He noticed then that she was wearing a heavy quilted robe with nothing underneath it. It fell open from the violence of his shove and she quickly gathered it around her. He went on, "I can remember when you weren't that careful, Margo."

She didn't answer, licking her electric-red lips, looking at him and then away from him. Steve grinned tightly down at her, holding the gun a foot from her body. "Who you waiting for, Margo? Me? No, it wouldn't be me, would it, baby? You're waiting

for that jealous Romeo you told me about, your suspicious fiancé, lover-boy. You know who I mean: Oscar Gross, the guy that murdered Cotton. Murdered him with your help. Isn't that right—Maggie?"

"Please, Steve. You're not making sense. You're all wrong." She was nearly under control now, and Steve could almost feel her gathering her wits, getting words ready for him, lies ready for him. He glared at her, anger thickening his tongue. "Listen to this good, Margo. I came up here for some answers, and you'll do fine. You've got all I need to get rid of a frame. Now give me some answers fast. I want the whole thing: why you and Gross framed me, what you get out of it, what Cotton had on Gross that made Gross murder him, why you tried to get me stuck in the gas chamber—"

She interrupted him, speaking rapidly, pleadingly. "Oh, Steve, no! Oh, you're so wrong, Steve, darling. I know I shouldn't have told the police you weren't with me that night, but I knew they wouldn't hold you long. I knew you hadn't killed anybody. They couldn't have held you." She licked her lips, breasts heaving

with her quickened breathing. "But I couldn't let Oscar know I'd . . . been with you. I had to think about myself. I *had* to."

"Sure. Especially till I breathed that cyanide up at San Quentin."

She shook her head violently. "No, Steve! You *know* I'd have come forward if there'd been any danger for you. Even if it meant my . . . my honor. My life, even."

Steve would have laughed if he hadn't still been so furious. "Honor," he said softly. "You lost all of that somewhere in these last seven years. You haven't any honor left. You're a bum, Maggie. A one-hundred-percent bum."

She sucked in her breath, her lips curling, and started to answer him, then stopped in time. She composed her face and stood up slowly. "Steve," she said softly, "you're letting your mind play tricks on you. I know what you've been through, what a horrible time you've had. I'm sorry now, but I didn't know how serious it was at first. I'll help you now, Steve. I'll help you . . . any way I can."

She was standing before him, her arms spread wide, the palms up as if in appeal. The quilted robe had fallen slightly apart.

Her voice went on, quiet, persuasive, "Darling, you must know that I'll help you. You do believe me, don't you?"

Steve swept his eyes over her, then looked at her face. She put her hands on his chest and said softly, "I've been such a fool, Steve. I'm in such a mess. Darling, you must know. You must know I'm still . . . still in love with you."

With her last words her voice dropped almost to a whisper, became more tense and seductive, and she swayed her hips toward him. She held to his shoulder with one hand.

Steve said, "You don't know who killed Cotton, Margo?"

"No."

"You don't know anything about my being framed?"

"No. No, darling." She leaned against him gently, persuasively, her tongue moistening her lower lip, making it gleam in the light, her mouth fashioned into a small pout.

"And you're really . . . still in love with me?"

"Oh, so much, Steve. I am. I want you now, Steve." Her voice was a gasp in her throat: "Oh, Steve!"

He said softly, "You are full of

beans, Margo, and you have as much appeal for me as a female ape."

He had spoken softly, as persuasively as she had, and for a moment she started to smile, her lips parting. Then the words penetrated to her mind and her face went blank. Her lips pulled back from her teeth and her face seemed to squeeze together, become smaller, more evil. Her eyes narrowed to slits and a strangled sound hissed from her mouth as she jerked her hand from Steve's shoulder, the long fingers curved like talons and the nails slashing in a vicious arc toward Steve's eyes.

He threw up his hand to ward off her swinging arm, then placed his open hand against her contorted face and shoved her with all his strength back toward the divan against the wall. Her knees buckled as she hit it and she sprawled backwards, her head slamming into the wall with a dull thump.

For a moment she lay crumpled on the divan, then she sat up straight and pulled the robe tightly around her. She shook her head, then looked straight at Steve with her face twisted, the lipstick smeared on her mouth, and spat words at him. She swore

softly, professionally, hurling obscenities and epithets at him until Steve said harshly, "Shut up, Margo!"

The violence of his tone stopped her, and before she could continue Steve said matter of factly, "That's a rather nice face you have, Margo. Quite an attractive face. Once there was a time when I wouldn't have hurt a hair of your head, but right now, love, I'm about to start chopping up your kisser with this." He waved the revolver in his right hand. "You all through lying?"

"I'm not lying," she snapped.

"Let me refresh your memory, Margo. The night Cotton was murdered, you turned up in my life again—for the first time in over *seven years*. Coincidence? No, baby, all part of the plan to make me the fall guy."

"You're—"

"Shut up! Then somebody suggests we go up to the gambling room. *You* suggest it. That's important, too. Both Cotton and I have to win some money. *You* steer me around and make sure I win several hundred dollars on Gross' rigged tables. *You* pick up my chips and dump them in front of a cashier who's already been instructed to pay me in bills from a certain sequence—the sequence

Cotton was later to be given. And I mean given; he didn't actually win it any more than I did. We just thought we were winning."

"Steve, please."

He ignored her and went on. "But the fun hadn't really started, had it, Margo? Now you had to get me out of sight for the night; make sure I didn't have an alibi for Cotton's murder. At your house—it was fun, Margo, but it really wasn't worth it. I guess you phoned Gross before we started to play; told him I was taken care of and he could start shooting. That was the liquor that never came. You scratched me; that was the scratch the cashier was supposed to have given me. Then in the morning there's a button gone from my coat—later to wind up in the dead cashier's hand. Funny thing, I mentioned losing a button when you'd hardly looked at me, but you knew right away what button I was talking about, where it came from, what color it was, everything. Why not? You jerked the thing off as part of the frame. Better if I didn't notice it was gone; but since I had, you pacified me. You didn't want me getting leery then."

She stared at him, unsmiling, not trying to interrupt. She was

breathing heavily, the thick robe held close around her.

Steve continued. "Then in the morning you rushed me out before I was even awake. You drove me near the only cafe open at that ungodly hour, then probably watched me go into *Dan's Hamburger Hut*. Another funny thing: right after I got there the cops showed up. Only three people knew where I was. You and two others who didn't even go near a phone or get out of my sight—so you called the cops, Margo. Then, just to cap it all nice and neat, you told the cops I spent half an hour at your place and left. I was tied up tight. It was good enough, too. Only I was supposed to be stuck in jail where I wouldn't have a chance to prove it was a frame. I wasn't supposed to get out of jail and carve up your face."

He paused for several seconds, looking down at her, watching the revulsion grow on her face along with the fear. She put one hand to her cheek, looking at the hard barrel of the .38 steady in Steve's hand. He watched her face go slack, get paler, watched the horror growing in her dark, wide-set eyes.

"Let's have it, Margo," he said. "Give it all to me fast, then we'll

tell it to the cops. That way you'll still have the same face tomorrow. Otherwise . . ."

He didn't finish it. He didn't have to. The look on her face was almost a burlesque of fright. She said, the words coming all in a rush, "Please, please, Steve. Don't hurt me. Don't . . . put the gun away." She stopped.

"Keep talking."

Her eyes darted around the room, then back to Steve's face. She licked her lips again and said, "Put the gun away, Steve. Don't point it at me. I'll tell you all of it, anything you want to know. I'll tell you everything. Only first put the gun away. I can't talk with that thing in front of me."

Steve sighed with relief. He felt that he already knew enough about what Margo and Gross had done, but he'd wanted to soften Margo up to the point where she'd gladly tell everything to the police. He started to stick the revolver back in his trousers, then stopped. It seemed strange that she was so insistent on his putting away the gun. And, with his senses alerted, he thought he detected a falseness in her expression, an exaggeration of the fear she should be feeling.

She noticed his expression and hesitation, and suddenly her own

expression changed completely. She leaned back against the divan and relaxed, then ran a hand through her black hair and said in her trained voice, calmly and distinctly, "On second thought, you can go straight to hell." She smiled at him as if she'd just heard a mildly amusing dirty story.

Steve understood the significance of her smile and her remark immediately, but he knew it must already be too late. He started to whirl around, bringing up the gun still in his hand, when the voice stopped him.

It was a calm, confident voice, deep and powerful. The owner of that voice sounded as if he had the situation well in hand. It was a whole-division-of-Marines voice and it said easily, "No, Bennett. Not if you like living. That's better. Now, very carefully, drop the popgun, jerk."

11

STEVE WAS motionless for a moment, his anger with himself almost bringing tears to his eyes. He clenched his jaws and the muscles of his neck swelled out sharply as he pulled his lips back against his teeth.

He recognized the voice from that night at the *Cockatoo*. Oscar

Gross, back from wherever he'd gone. Gross had probably been behind him for some time while Steve had all his attention focused on Margo as she pretended she was ready to talk.

The thoughts flashed through Steve's mind in a fraction of a second, and he considered turning and snapping a shot at Gross. But if Gross had a gun . . .

If he had a gun. It might be a bluff. Steve held his revolver tightly in his hand and twisted his head around till he could see over his shoulder.

Gross hadn't been bluffing. He stood wide-legged ten feet from Steve, seeming to fill with his bulk the partly open door through which Steve had entered. He held a heavy .45 caliber automatic in his big hand. One eyebrow was raised high over the other and a broad smile was on his handsome face. He looked happy. And the gun was pointed squarely and unwaveringly at Steve's head.

Steve reluctantly unclenched his fingers and let his gun drop to the floor. Margo leaned over casually and picked it up. Then, just as casually, she continued the movement and swung the gun hard against Steve's jaw.

He saw the blow coming and

tried to duck out of the way even forgetting in the instinctive action the gun Gross held on him, but the .38 landed solidly and pain caromed along his cheek and flamed inside his head as he staggered and fell to his knees. Steve shook his head slowly, dazed, feeling the wetness trickle down his face.

He heard Gross speaking to Margo. "I saw the light on, honey, from down on the street when I got back. Wondered why you'd be in here. So, to the rescue." He laughed, his laughter booming in the room.

Steve's head cleared a little as Margo answered, "I knew you'd show, Oscar. I strung him along. But he's figured a lot of it. Too much."

Steve straightened and looked around at them. Margo was looking at Gross, but Gross kept his eyes—and the .45—steadily on Steve. Steve pulled himself to the divan and sat on it, his mind beginning to function, think, plan, search for a way out of this, but he could think of nothing.

Gross looked at Steve but spoke to Margo as if the two of them were alone in the room. "Yeah, honey, I heard enough. Looks like this one goes, too. But he set it up for us. Busted a window

downstairs to get in; carried a gun—a cop's gun." He chuckled. "And I just finished raising hell with the cops down at the station, like I said I would. Told them they better get this madman we got here before he shot up the whole town." He glanced toward the desk, then back at Steve and laughed again. "Chisels and flashlight, too. Perfect. So, we kill a burglar."

The casual reference to his death sent a chill along Steve's spine. He swallowed and said, "Just like you killed Jim Clay, huh, Gross? Just like that?"

Oscar Gross kept smiling and said pleasantly in his rumbling voice, "Killed Jim Clay? The Honorable Congressman—almost? How you talk. How you do talk. Why, that's the silliest thing I ever heard." He turned to Margo. "Wouldn't you say that was the silliest thing you ever heard, honey?"

She got into the spirit of the thing. "It sure is," she said. "It's the silliest thing I ever heard."

They both laughed loudly and then Gross said to Steve, "Doesn't that convince you, jerk?"

Steve said levelly, "You're having fun now, Gross. But you're going to get yours. You're going to get it good."

Gross laughed, his thick chest heaving. "You'll haunt me after you're dead. That it, Bennett?"

"Me and Cotton and the cashier. Maybe more."

Gross didn't answer for a while, then he said slowly, "I guess you figured it out, Bennett, or you wouldn't be here."

"I figured it out."

"No matter. In another minute you won't be able to tell anybody else." He paused. "Let's see, you broke in here, and we had a fight, and then I shot you. That's the way it happened." He frowned. "But if I hit you after it happens—after you're dead—you won't bruise good. Dead people don't bruise. This has to be right, so—"

He stepped forward suddenly and swung a rock-hard fist into Steve's stomach. Steve saw what was coming and tried to dodge, tensing his stomach muscles as he balled his hands into fists. For only a moment he thought that this was his chance, even though Gross had a gun, and then the fist landed in his stomach and the air rushed out of his lungs. Steve doubled over, sickness gagging him as he strained every muscle to keep from going down. He stayed on his feet, bent over, unable immediately to straighten up. Gross chuckled softly. When

Steve felt the breath coming back into his lungs he swallowed the moistness in his throat, gulped air, and then as quickly as he could he straightened and stepped toward Gross, throwing his right fist in a roundhouse swing at the point of Gross' heavy jaw.

Gross stepped easily inside the swing and whipped his right hand, weighted with the heavy .45, into Steve's middle, then hooked his left fist hard to Steve's cheek. Steve fell, sprawling, on his back, blackness gathering in front of his eyes, but he managed to cling to consciousness.

He heard the rumble of voices again without being able to distinguish the words, then, dimly he heard Gross say, "You better get some clothes on, honey. Better if you're dressed when the cops get here—we'll tell them we were going over your routine for the show when Bennett busted in. And hurry up. I want to get this over with."

Steve lay on his back, not moving, full consciousness returning slowly. He was as good as dead already, he thought, and there didn't seem to be much he could do about it. Gross was much bigger than Steve, more skilled in fighting, with greater strength. And he had a gun. Steve swal-

lowed again, shook his head, then managed to sit up, his back against the divan. His stomach was sore and it hurt to breathe, but otherwise he felt numb. His face didn't hurt now, and he felt some of his strength returning. Not that it would do him much good. He managed to climb to his feet, facing Gross.

Margo came back from the bedroom, but Gross said, "You better stay in there another minute, honey. You don't want to watch this."

Margo looked at Steve and pressed her lips together. "Do we have to—" she started.

Gross interrupted her. "What do you think? You knew what we were getting into, baby. This one winds it up. Now get in there. Or do you want to watch?"

She hesitated, chewing on her under lip, then shuddered slightly. She turned and went into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

Gross glanced at the gun as if to check it, then lifted the big .45 and pointed it at Steve's chest.

Steve wanted to speak; he *had* to speak. He had to rush toward Gross, spoil his aim, but for part of that moment he was paralyzed. He saw the barrel of the gun waver slightly, then steady. He saw

the slight tensing of Gross' facial muscles as he prepared to pull the trigger, and he saw the lips thin slightly on the wide, sensual mouth.

Suddenly Steve said, the words almost one in his rush to get them out. "Kill me and you're dead!"

Gross hesitated, the gun barrel wavered again slightly as the merest trace of a frown creased his forehead. The frown went away, the gun steadied, but Gross didn't fire the automatic.

Steve said again, shakily, "I mean it. If you kill me now, you're dead too, Gross. Fire that gun and it's as good as blowing your brains out."

Gross sighed and relaxed a little. "You want to live for five seconds more, I guess. That it, Bennett?"

Steve could hardly stand. His knees felt like jelly and his voice was nearly unrecognizable when he spoke. But he said, "That's true enough; five seconds now seems like a lifetime. But I meant it, Gross. You should be running now. You're dead if you don't run—or if you do, for that matter. It doesn't make much difference if you kill me, Gross—except to me. You're through. You made too many mistakes."

GROSS wasn't smiling; he stared at Steve with his brows pulled down. "If this is a song and dance, jerk, you'll regret it. You'll beg me to put a bullet in you before I get through."

Steve shook his head. "I knew before I came up here that you murdered Cotton. And that twangy-voiced cashier. It wasn't a guess; I knew it. And pretty quick the cops will be on your tail, Gross. You made too many mistakes."

"I don't make mistakes, jerk."

Steve managed a laugh. "You made a dozen. Some of them maybe you can fix—if I tell you about them. Some of them you can't fix. The only thing I don't know, Gross, is just what Cotton had on you that made you kill him. I've got good ideas: I know some of what he dug up on you—and he told me you had blood on your hands."

Gross stared at Steve for several seconds, his lips pursed, then he said, "Not that it makes any difference to you, Bennett, but I knocked off a guy a while back. Blood on my hands, huh?" He chuckled. "Clay asked too many questions and got too close. Like you, now—follow the leader. He was in my hair plenty. And it

looked like he was going to beat my man in November and have more weight to throw around. Now I guess you know it all, huh, jerk?"

Steve pressed his luck, seeing the puzzled frown still on Gross' forehead. "You've really been the jerk, Gross—and you don't even know it." Anger flushed Gross' heavy face, but Steve went on, "Oh, you were careful enough. You had one of your boys check around Laguna, asking questions of my friends; you found out I was Cotton's closest friend, his partner, with him all the time—and that I used to be crazy about Margo Whitney, and still thought I was. You set it all up, got her in on it, had another of your boys buy the gun from me. You picked me as the perfect patsy so there'd be no loose ends after you killed Cotton; you'd be clear. It's simple enough now. Everything was built around me, and once I'm eliminated as a suspect, your whole frame falls apart. You tried too hard. I know it, and the police soon will."

Gross' frown deepened, then it went away and he grinned pleasantly. "Sure," he said sarcastically. "I get it. You sat down and wrote a letter to the D.A. 'I'm innocent,' you said."

"Don't be stupid. I didn't write anybody. All the proof I need is already down at police headquarters. I had it when the cops picked me up, only I didn't know it."

Gross looked angry. He said harshly, "You better talk real fast and good, Bennett. If there's anything screwed up, you tell me about it now. Otherwise I ruin you. Maybe a slug in your leg, then one in your arm . . ." He waved the gun a little. "This thing just about tears an arm off, Bennett. You'll tell me pretty, or not so pretty, one way or another."

Steve had no doubt that Gross meant exactly what he said. He started talking. "First thing, Gross, you had some hired hand of yours buy the gun; I put his description on the sales papers, and even if—"

Gross interrupted, chuckling. "Cross it off. He's out near Dry Lake in the sycamores. Dead as you'll be. That all you got?"

Steve grinned, feeling better, his voice stronger. "Not by a long shot," he said. "Don't forget, Gross, that while the cops think I'm guilty, you're safe. But all that guys like Riley and the D.A. need is one little smell to start them digging. And as soon as I'm

not it, you are—you're the *only* guy who could have set up the frame so completely: the gun; getting that twangy-voiced cashier to phone Cotton pretending to be an informant; getting Margo; letting Cotton and me win the stacked money from your rigged tables." Steve paused, then said slowly, "There was another big mistake, Gross, that deal. You let Cotton win the money, complete with witnesses, almost perfect and air tight. He won it all right. And he had it in his wallet when you shot him in the chest. But when you lifted the bills from his wallet some of Cotton's blood got on the edges of the bills; when I saw them I thought it was like tinting on book pages before I realized it was blood. And you let me win money, too; if I hadn't won it I'd have sure as hell thought it was funny when eleven hundred bucks suddenly flew into my wallet. Oh, you were careful—only those eleven bills of mine are crisp and clean like new bank money. And I'm supposed to have taken them from Cotton's roll after I shot him. Gross, I had to get those bills *before* Cotton was shot." He paused. "Just as I told the cops."

Gross was frowning. Steve said,

"Wouldn't you call that a mistake, Gross? And *all* those bills are down at the police station right now. And, of course, you had to kill the cashier when he'd done his bit. He was in on some of it and knew enough so that he was another weak point in your frame. So, you got rid of him and tied that one to me, too. How's *your* alibi for that one? Trouble is, there were a lot of other weak spots; enough. You want to hear some more?"

Gross didn't say anything.

Margo came back into the room and looked puzzledly at Gross, and then at Steve. "What's the matter?" she asked Gross finally.

"Nothing," he said. "Just letting the jerk talk a little. He's not going anywhere."

"She was your biggest mistake, Gross. She really tied it."

Steve, watching Margo, thought she paled a little. "Why in hell didn't you shoot him?" she said. "I thought you wanted this over with."

"Bloodthirsty woman," Steve said. "And that's not all she's thirsty for." He kept watching Margo. Maybe she hadn't been kidding about one thing: the jealous Romeo. She stepped toward Steve, fingers curling again, but

Gross said suddenly, "Leave him be. What you mean by that crack, Bennett?"

"Nothing." Steve watched Margo relax a little, sigh slightly, her fingers uncurling. He was sure now. "But she's not very smart," he continued. He looked at Gross, letting his mind work on the new angle while he talked. "For one thing, she did too much—like you. She steered me through your club here, got me out of the way at her place, kept me there all night. Even scratched me as per schedule and jerked off a button from my coat—that was for you, wasn't it, Gross? Out the window, or what?"

Gross nodded, his face sober. "Front door. You were out cold."

Steve grinned. "But when I noticed the button gone, she obligingly sewed on another for me. The coat—and button—is down at the jail, too."

"So? So what?"

Steve shrugged. "I'm no expert on crime detection, but it seems likely that since she used a button from a card with others on it, and thread from a spool in her house, some smart science boy might be able to prove they came from her place."

"Might be, but weak. They'll have no reason to look. You won't tell them to, jerk."

"You've got a point. I guess her biggest mistake was loving me. She's sure a hot tomato."

Gross stared blankly at Steve for a long moment, glanced at Margo, and then looked back at Steve with anger coloring his face. His smile went away completely and, scowling, he took a step toward Steve. Steve tensed his muscles to swing or grab for the gun if Gross got close enough.

As Gross took the step he growled, "Loving *who*?"

Steve opened his mouth to answer, dig a little deeper into Gross' pride and jealousy, sure now that Margo had lied to Gross about that night. But before he could answer, Margo stepped close to Gross and put a hand lightly on his arm. She didn't burst into angry denials, but said, "Watch it, honey. You're too smart to be taken in by that old gag."

If she'd yelled, tried frantically to deny the truth of Steve's assertion, Gross might have wondered about it. But her quiet assurance and flattery calmed him immediately. The smile came back to his face and he asked

Steve, "Who do you think you're kidding?"

Margo said, "He just wanted you close to him, honey. Look at him; he's practically on his toes."

Steve relaxed a little and said, "What makes you so sure she didn't love me, Gross?"

He said easily, "She slipped you a mickey, jerk. I guess you still don't know that. You slept like a baby she told me."

"She told you. And where did I sleep like a baby?"

Margo interrupted quickly. "I told him how you passed out on the couch, Bennett. Just like it happened."

Steve grinned. "And you believe her, Gross?"

"Sure. I trust my little doll." He looked at Margo. "Don't I, baby? Margo's too smart to cross me; that right, baby?"

"You know that, honey. You ought to know it." Margo's voice was the whispering seductiveness Steve had heard when, a few minutes before, she had said to him, "I love you."

Gross chuckled. "Call our incorruptible police force, Margo. Tell them to come out and pick up the jerk. Tell them, unfortunately, we had to shoot him."

Steve watched with his mouth

dry as Margo walked swivel-hipped to the far side of the steel desk where she could watch them while she called. She picked up the phone and dialed a number.

Steve said unsteadily, "Haven't you got any sense, Gross?"

"Look, Bennett. All this crap you gave me means zero. You'll be dead. How you going to tell anybody else? Don't you know I can take care of the rest?"

"Margo too?" Steve took a deep breath, feeling strength in his muscles again, but unable completely to calm his voice. He knew he was going into his last pitch now; shooting it all. And his life depended on getting Gross off balance. He said, "She'll cross you again, Gross. She already has. You say you trust her. Well, think about this a minute: I trusted her, too."

"Entirely different, Bennett. You're not me. Say your prayers."

Margo was speaking into the phone, telling the police at the other end of the line to come out and pick up Steve Bennett at the *Cockatoo*. Steve knew that before a radio car got out here Gross meant for him to be dead. All his work, and running, and fear and hopes would have been for nothing. His anger, fed by his help-

lessness and fear, was mounting into a kind of blind fury.

Margo hung up. "Tickled pink," she said casually. "Sending a radio car right out." She paused. "And there'd better be a body."

"O.K. Get into the bedroom."

"No . . . I'll watch it this time."

Steve interrupted. "She wants to be sure you don't find out I made her."

Gross just grinned.

"I was there all night," Steve said. "It was fun. What the hell you think I did? Twiddle my thumbs?"

"You slept, jerk."

"Yeah! I hadn't seen Margo for over seven years, you know that, but I can describe the little appendectomy scar she got a year ago—"

Margo broke in quickly, her voice a little strained, "Honey, look." She pulled the robe apart. "He shoved me around before you got here. Don't let him kid you. He saw it then, tonight."

Gross was squinting a little, wondering. Steve said, "Tonight? Gross, did I find out just tonight that she likes to bite your ears? That she likes to call you 'Daddy.' That right? That right, Daddy? And listen, sucker, she

scratched me for you—but not in the front room on the couch."

Gross hesitated, looked from Margo to Steve, the gun ready in his hand. Steve went on without pausing, "And unless she's burned the thing, there's blood on one of her pillows."

Margo said in a shrill voice, "Don't let him con you, Oscar. He'd say anything—"

"Shut up," Gross said. He hesitated, licked his lips.

Steve strained his ears for the sound of the police sirens. He knew that, no matter whether he convinced Gross or not, once that chilling sound reached Gross' ears he'd shoot. Gross had gotten in too deeply now, no matter what happened, no matter what Margo had done, to leave Steve alive to talk to the police. As soon as the sirens shrilled, Gross would kill him—and decide about Margo later. But the sound didn't come. Steve felt cold sweat on his face, wondering why the police sirens were not shrilling inside the room; they should already have been here.

His voice cracked as he spoke again. "You convinced, Gross? She's not only double-crossed both of us, but the cops will have you before the night's out. I told you to run. Blood finished you,

Gross. Cotton's blood, the blood on your hands, my blood. And there's blood from my cheek on my handkerchief, and it's down at the police station too. There's Margo's special San Francisco lipstick on that handkerchief, too, Gross—but *over* the blood. The blood from my face where the cashier is supposed to have scratched me when I killed him is *under* Margo's fancy red lipstick that I wiped off my mouth. You get that, Gross? So will the cops. If the cashier clawed me, I must have gone back and kissed Margo later—there's probably not another woman in town who uses that same sticky red stuff. I must have gone back and *at least* kissed her."

Gross' handsome face was contorted now. "This does you no good, Bennett," he said angrily. "Neither of you."

"Wake up, Gross," Steve said loudly, afraid to hear the sirens, afraid Gross would fire any second now, anyway. He went on, speaking the words in a rush. "And you know I did more than kiss her. The cops will, too—and they'll die laughing. Laughing at you, Gross. She's ruined you, sucker."

Steve gambled everything on the anger and confusion his

words had excited in Gross, showing now on his red face. He snapped out his last words, then turned and walked away from Gross toward Margo, still standing beyond the desk. The phone was at the desk's edge in front of her—and the big half-full beer bottle was at the edge of the desk near Steve. Margo was facing Steve, and he was directly between Gross and Margo as she backed away.

Steve stopped at the desk. Margo was looking at his face and he hoped she wouldn't notice what he did with his hands. He wrapped his right hand around the neck of the quart beer bottle.

He felt the smooth glass against his palm as Gross said in a strangled voice, "I guess I kill you right now!"

Steve got a flashing glimpse of the corners of Margo's scarlet mouth pulling down as he whirled and threw the heavy bottle at Gross' twisted face.

12

THE blast of the big automatic sounded to Steve like the roar of a cannon in the room, but he wasn't hit and he saw beer spout from the neck of the bottle as its base struck Gross near the shoul-

der a fraction of a second before he fired. Before the bottle reached the floor Steve leaped toward Gross and crashed solidly into him. The automatic boomed again and Steve almost yelled aloud as the bullet and blast of flame burned along his side.

He swung with a balled fist and hit Gross' beefy arm. The gun clattered to the floor and skidded a few feet across the room, and Steve leaped toward it, knowing his bare fists were not a match for the other man's agility and strength. But Gross, as the gun fell, waited for Steve's move, then swung his arm like a hammer and slammed his fist alongside Steve's head.

It was not a solid blow but it dazed Steve and his eyes filmed as he crashed to the floor, out of reach of the automatic. He saw the blurred mass of Gross leap past him and bend toward the gun, and Steve arched his body desperately, lashed out with his right foot and kicked Gross in the side of the neck as his hand touched the gun. Gross' solid body jerked and the gun skittered across the room to the wall. For a brief moment Gross paused on one knee, shaking his big head, then he turned toward Steve and threw all his weight

on top of him, reaching with his strong hands for Steve's throat.

Both men were fighting with fingers, fists, knees, and feet as they sprawled on the floor, rolling, first one on top and then the other. Steve, thrown onto his back, saw Gross' sweating face above him and he jabbed with stiff fingers at the staring eyes; he felt one finger scrape across the smooth eyeball, and, fighting for his life, he clutched with his fingers, trying to gouge, rip, tear, trying to slash the eyes from Gross' head, then Gross jerked his face away and brought his knee up hard between Steve's thighs.

Steve rolled in desperation and took the main force of the knee on one thigh, but deep pain and nausea flooded his groin and swelled in his belly. Sickness choked in his throat as he swung wildly with his left hand and felt his fist thud into Gross' corded neck.

Gross brought the side of his clenched fist down on Steve's nose and hot tears blinded Steve momentarily. He squirmed dizzily, his sight dimmed and panic pulsing in his throat, his right arm thrown out for support and leverage, His right hand banged against the beer bottle and his fingers closed around its middle.

He seized it, gripped it tightly, and swung it with all his strength against the top of Gross' head.

His awkward position robbed the blow of much of its force, but Gross was momentarily stunned by it. Steve squirmed from underneath the heavy body, hearing only the sound of grunting from Gross' mouth, now stained with red from one of Steve's flailing hands. With a detached part of himself, even as he pulled himself free of the weight of the other's body and watched the heavier man pull himself slightly back, shaking his head, Steve realized that these were the *only* sounds; that there still had been no siren scream, no shriek of tires squealing as a radio car skidded to a stop in front of the *Cockatoo*.

Steve was panting through his open mouth, a leaden weariness pulling at every muscle, already weakened by his earlier beating. He watched Gross slide further away, then push himself up from the floor. Steve forced his aching muscles to pull him away toward the wall, the beer bottle still clutched in his right hand. He forced himself to his feet as Gross clamped his teeth together, his head lowered, and glared at Steve.

Steve felt the gripping pain in his groin, weakening him, felt

dizziness clogging his mind again as Gross swelled his huge chest and then blew air hissing out of his mouth, unclenching his fists and then balling them tightly together again. For a moment the two men looked at each other, and Steve shook his head to clear the fog from his brain.

Gross said in a hoarse voice, pausing to gulp air, "You're finished . . . Bennett. You look ready to . . . pass out, jerk."

Steve knew his face must be white. He fought against the pain, willed the blackness away. He saw Gross grin and step suddenly toward him, closing the four or five feet that had separated them, and Steve swung the beer bottle in a hard backhand against the wall behind him. It cracked and shattered, leaving the neck and a jagged, vicious circle of glass in his hand. He yelled, "*I'll kill you, Gross! I'll blind you. I'll cut your damned throat!*"

Gross' mouth was stretched wide and he seemed not to hear the words. He lunged toward Steve, one hard fist driving ahead of him, and Steve swung the jagged glass in a slashing arc that ended against Gross' cheek. Steve felt the gritty jar in his hand as the sharp glass sliced through flesh and scraped against bone,

then Gross' fist landed against his chest and threw him reeling against the wall.

But Gross staggered back, his teeth grinding together in pain, and the muscles of his neck standing out in swollen cords. Half the left side of his face had been laid open by the slashing glass, and a great, bloody flap of lacerated flesh hung down along his chin, dragging the left side of his mouth down in a slack mass of streaming red. Unrecognizable sounds spilled from his mouth like the grunting of an animal, and he put one hand to his wet cheek, then roared in pain and anger as he leaped at Steve with his hands clutching.

Steve drew his right hand back to his shoulder, slammed his open left hand against Gross' bloody face, his curved fingers thrusting against the forehead and forcing the head back, exposing the thick-muscled neck; then, with what seemed like the last of his strength, Steve drove his fist forward and buried the slivered, red-stained remnant of the bottle neck in that burly throat.

Gross clutched at his throat, then dropped his hands and stared at the liquid stain on them, stepped back away from Steve, the expression on his face unrec-

ognizable, torn out of shape and smeared with shock and redness. He made a noise, like a man gargling and trying to speak. He turned his head slowly toward Margo, and Steve with his back pressed against the wall followed his gaze.

Steve had forgotten Margo; forgotten everything except the need to fight, to kill if necessary, to stay alive. But now he saw her looking, not at Gross but at him, Steve's gun in her hand, her finger curled around the trigger.

Even as she pointed the .38 at him Steve thought he heard the pounding of feet in the hall, and thought dazedly that it could not be the police because he would have heard the sirens, heard them arrive below. As Margo raised the gun, Steve tried to hurl himself weakly from the wall, but the sharp crack of the gun sounded and he felt the bullet tear into his shoulder. His momentum carried him forward, the impact of the slug twisting his body around toward Margo and he saw her, with the room seeming to tilt crazily around her, still pointing the gun at him. He saw the spit of flame from the muzzle of the gun and felt the slug rip into his stomach, and he heard the cry of voices, yells and shouted words,

and again the thud of heavy feet.

Then he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling as monstrous figures seemed to float around him in a watery brightness that darkened and then grew brighter again. He felt no tearing pain, only a stinging, burning in his stomach and shoulder. He wondered, confused, what was happening, thinking that he was still alive, still in the room with Gross and Margo. Now he remembered: Gross had held the .45 on him . . . but it had been Margo . . .

Another figure was near him, kneeling by him, speaking to him. Steve turned his head slowly and looked at the face close to his own. It was a man he'd seen before, he remembered. A policeman; he'd seen him somewhere.

The man was speaking. "Take it easy, Bennett. Doctor on his way. You'll be all right." A chuckle. "You'll last till the trial."

Steve thought hazily, the dope didn't even know. Now he remembered the man—the cop on the radio, the guy who'd shot at him when he busted from jail.

Steve forced the words from his throat. "What . . . took you so long?" He wanted to explain that he'd have been dead if they'd ar-

rived on time, but it didn't seem worth the effort.

The officer said, anger distorting his voice, "That damn little hell-cat. That crazy Christine Lawton dame. She went nuts when the call come in on you. Busted my microphone. She's in a cell and she'll stay there a hundred years if I get my way."

Steve was wondering why the cop's anger was so great when the man said, "Couldn't call the prowl cars because she busted my mike. Damn her, she busted it over my head."

Steve grinned slightly, imagining the scene at the police station. Chris, he thought . . . Chris . . . and then the room darkened again and the blackness edged nearer.

13

STEVE BENNETT frowned and regarded with a baleful eye the empty bowl in his hand. He leaned back against the pillows of his hospital bed and looked up at Chris sitting beside him.

"Soup," he said dolefully. "Soup! When do I get some food?"

He and Chris were alone in the room. She smiled down at him. "Well," she said perkily,

"if you'd been shot in the head, maybe you could eat anything. If you could eat. You shouldn't be complaining, Mr. Bennett."

"I guess not." He shook his head, then looked back at her. "It's sure good to see you, Chris. This is my first chance at visitors."

"I know. I'd have been here before."

Steve moistened his lips, thinking back to that last night at the *Cockatoo*. Gross was dead now, he knew; he had died in the room above the *Cockatoo* even before Steve had been taken down to the waiting ambulance. But Margo had been there to watch him die, and while she was still shocked and frightened the police got the whole story from her. And Steve had seen Sergeant Joe Riley once, on his second day in the hospital, and told him everything he knew—including Gross' reference to gun-buyer "Phillip Knowle" in the sycamores near Dry Lake. That, plus what the laboratory boys found, had wrapped it up.

Steve looked at Chris. "I guess you know you saved my neck. I mean the deal with the microphone. Your radioman."

Chris giggled. "Oh, he was mad; for a while they were go-

ing to keep me in jail forever. He and Riley had to take Riley's own car. And, Steve, he's not sweet on me any more."

Steve laughed, then groaned and put a hand over the bandages on his stomach.

Chris leaned toward him and took his hand in her small one. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be; I needed a laugh." He squeezed her hand. "You're in bright and early," he said. "You must have been hanging around the front gate."

"I was." She bobbed her head. "I've been here before today, but they wouldn't let me in to see you. But I stuck around to keep an eye on your nurses." Her brows drew together and she pursed her bright lips. "Too many patients fall for their nurses."

Steve brightened. "How'd you like my nurse?"

"She was too fat."

"Kind of cute, though."

"I didn't think so. I arranged for you to have another nurse."

"You *what*?"

"Got you a different nurse."

Steve glared at her. "Some old decrepit hag, no doubt."

"No, honest." She was serious. "Really a good-looking nurse. Young, too."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Well. You know, Chris, you're pretty darn swell. You've been swell all along. Would you . . . mind if I fell for one of the nurses?"

She tossed her head. "Maybe."

"Chris."

"Hmmm?"

"Come over here."

"Over where?"

"Here, stupid. Bend over."

She leaned close to him, her merry blue eyes twinkling. Steve put his left hand behind her head, started to pull her lips down to his. Someone coughed.

Steve looked around. A man was standing at the foot of the bed.

"Beat it," Steve yelled. "What the hell? Can't you see I'm busy?"

The guy just stood there.

Steve growled, "Of all the— beat it, I said!" He stretched his arm and pressed the buzzer at the side of the bed, then fell weakly back against the pillows.

"Nurse!" he yelled. "Nurse!"

Chris was smothering her laughter. "Silly," she giggled. "He is your nurse."

Steve frowned at her, then started to laugh again. He groaned and Chris leaned forward solicitously. He put his hand behind her head again and pulled her face close to his. The hell with the nurse.

"Chris," he asked, "for luck?"

Her breath brushed his lips and she smiled. Just before she kissed him she said softly, "Huh-uh; for me."

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